



Lord of the dance fulfils dream

Rafael Bonachela has found new inspiration as artistic director of the Sydney Dance Company, writes Suzanna Clarke

WHEN Rafael Bonachela created the composition *360 degrees* for the Sydney Dance Company last year, he had no intention of sticking around.

Now he is the new artistic director for one of Australia's top contemporary companies, about to embark on a national tour with its first stop the Queensland Performing Arts Centre on April 17.

"For me, taking on an established company like this feels like everything I have ever wanted," Bonachela says.

It's a new beginning for the 32-year-old SDC, which has been plagued by problems ranging from funding issues and a long-running pay dispute, to the death in a traffic accident of previous artistic director Tanja Liedtke in August 2007, after the departure of founder Graeme Murphy and partner Janet Vernon.

The company had been in a hiatus, with three guest choreographers brought in to fill the gap. Bonachela was one of them.

At the time Bonachela said he "wasn't auditioning for a permanent job". In any case, he had his own London-based Bonachela Dance Company to contend with, and was in hot demand to choreograph pieces for popular performers such as Kylie

Minogue and Madonna. Why would he move to the other side of the planet, where he had no ties, away from the very active European dance scene?

"I changed my mind being here," says Bonachela, in a rare few minutes break during rehearsals with the company's seven new and 10 established dancers at the SDC's Walsh Bay studios.

"I was invited here, and came to make the best piece I could make. Being here every day, I realised it was going to be a very open window to explore whatever I wanted to do. I also really enjoyed working with the company; the environment and their energy and commitment."

He particularly admires the "incredibly fearless approach to movement" that many Australian dancers possess, speculating their physicality could originate from their more outdoors upbringing. "In my last (London-based) project, five out of the six dancers I selected were Australian."

Another factor in his decision was the opportunity to work with a full-time company of 17 dancers.

"In London I have a project-based company . . . it felt right to have this opportunity to work with an established company. I'm 36, and I may as well do it now."



However, having achieved this won't stop him wanting more. "You have to have dreams in life."

Former English ballerina Darcey Bussell, now director of the Sydney Dance Company board, was Bonachela's champion during the selection of an artistic director. When *360 degrees* was shown in Sydney last July she is said to have given it a standing ovation.

The deal-maker for Bonachela was that the board agreed he could take on other projects that fitted in with his Sydney Dance Company schedule.

"I have a great job to do in this country, with a new company with a new vision, but the world is out there," he says.

With a ready smile, constantly gesticulating hands and an infectious enthusiasm, Bonachela is a confessed movement junkie.

His intensity harks back to his Spanish heritage, despite living in England for the past 18 years.

Born in Barcelona, Bonachela says: "I was the kid who made dance in the school."

Inspired by Michael Jackson, he would take children off the street, and get them to do his steps with the backing of a tape recorder.

"As soon as I had an opportunity in school, I started making my own pieces," he says.

In macho 1970s Spain, this was considered far from cool, and sometimes Bonachela would find himself the target of name-calling and even stone-throwing. However, "it changed because I was so persistent".

As soon as he could, he headed for London and began training at the London Studio Centre.

"In five years I made myself into a dancer, with passion, commitment and faith. I worked hard, dedicated myself as much as I could," he says.

At 20 he was taken on by the legendary Rambert Dance Company (formerly Ballet Rambert), and remained with them from 1992 to 2004, performing works by the likes of Merce Cunningham, Jiri Kylian, Twyla Tharp and Frederick Ashton.

"I was never interested in classical (ballet). It didn't fulfil me, and you must do what is true to you — although I'm an admirer of the great strength that classical technique produces," he says.

What Bonachela describes as "a little workshop piece", *Three Gone, Four Left Standing* premiered in 1998 at Sadlers Wells. Five years later he was appointed Rambert's associate

choreographer and choreographed nine works, including one that won the prestigious Choo San Goh Award (US). It was during these two years he was offered the opportunity to choreograph for Kylie Minogue.

"At first I wondered, how will this be seen? But then I decided I shouldn't be trying to follow anyone else's path. Kylie is just an angel. She was very generous and let me do what I wanted to do. We had fun."

The effect on his career was stellar. He was made all sorts of other offers. "But I stayed in my contemporary dance world. I didn't suddenly get infected, just because I decided to do a piece 20,000 people saw... But it gave me more confidence."

In July 2006 he was appointed as artist-in-residence at the South Bank Centre, London and founded his own dance company.

However, he says he didn't go to the SDC to make another Bonachela Dance Company. "I feel inspired by other choreographers and artists. I want this (the SDC) to be a place that breeds creativity — with the creation of new work as the focus."

With *360 degrees*, he collaborated with Sydney designer and events director Tony Assness, who made the video backdrop and gave the work its distinctive futuristic look.

"Everything is reflected into two big (mirrored) walls at the back, so you see 360," he says. "The music goes from classical 12th-century Spanish, to minimal techno, to contemporary, to industrial punk — that is what creates the tensions... It's a thrilling journey. It is quite full-on.

"It goes from creating disquiet, to being soothing, to having lots of emotional tensions. There is a fragmented narrative, about hope and desire."

His work is not narrative-driven; rather, he describes it as a poem, or an abstract painting.

"A poem is something that can be interpreted in many different ways... and it's not representative of anything except itself."

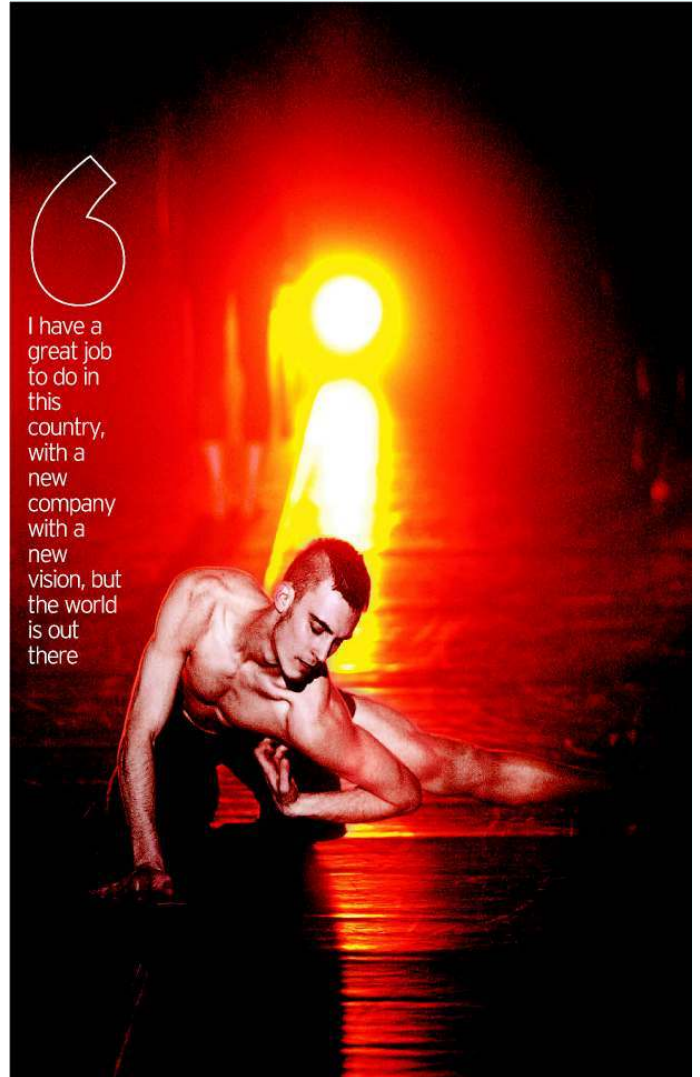
What he is interested in exploring are human relationships. "Dance is one of the few art forms that allows different viewpoints... Although I have grown up through English culture, I haven't become a super-polite Anglo-Saxon. I do like to be moved."



Courier Mail
04/04/2009
Page: 6
Section: etc
Region: Brisbane Circulation: 215383
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 381.00 sq.cms
Frequency: MTWTFS-



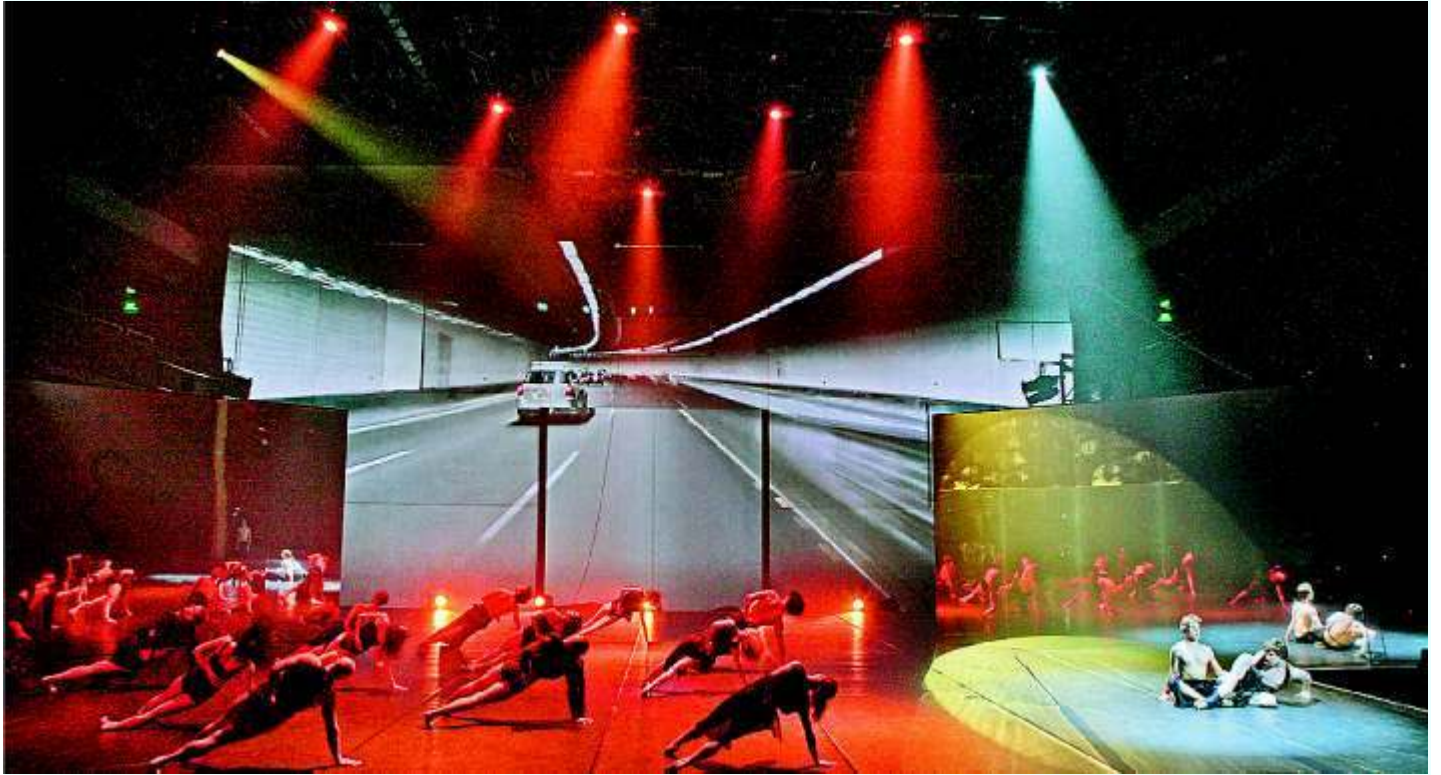
The Sydney Dance Company's
360 degrees, April 17-25, QPAC
Playhouse. www.qtix.com.au or 136 246.
Suzanna Clarke travelled to Sydney
courtesy of the Sydney Dance Company.



I have a
great job
to do in
this
country,
with a
new
company
with a
new
vision, but
the world
is out
there



Courier Mail
04/04/2009
Page: 6
Section: etc
Region: Brisbane Circulation: 215383
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 381.00 sq.cms
Frequency: MTWTFS-



GOOD moves ... above and top, scenes from Sydney Dance Company's production *360 Degrees*.