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Dance - We Unfold - Sydney Dance Company

Reviews, By **Matty Matt**, 1st April, 2009

The newly appointed artistic director of the **Sydney Dance Company**, **Barcelona-born Rafael Bonachela**, is eager to make a good first impression. His new work – aptly titled *We Unfold* – is a world premiere and bravely launches the season, introducing Sydney audiences to the choreographer's thematic and aesthetic aspirations for the Company.

A few months earlier, local dance enthusiasts had been treated to a first glimpse of the Spaniard's work, in the form of a commission titled *360°*. In a few breathless performances of the highly charged piece at Carriageworks, Bonachela had won over the critics, established an Australian fan base and raised our expectations sky high.

It is the first night of previews and the choreographer is understandably nervous. Two months in the making, *We Unfold* is barely ready for its first public debut. Bonachela says as much on the microphone before the curtain rises. "And if the lights go off or we have to interrupt the performance, feel free to talk amongst yourselves," he adds.

He need not have worried. An hour and a bit later the crowd is on its feet, cheering wildly the way one might at a Kylie concert (Bonachela often works with stars of popular culture, including Ms Minogue whose concerts he has choreographed). The performance has unfolded without a hitch, the dancers beam proudly, struggling to catch their breath, and the love affair between Sydney and its newest resident choreographer is in full bloom.

In the interval, 15 athletic dancers have given it all they had, managing to make the demanding routines look effortless. Dancing on a bare stage, lit only by dim beams of orange light and the monolithic glow of a giant video screen, they have taken Rafael Bonachela's kinetic vision and Ezio Bosso's triumphant music and made it theirs, breathing life into what began as a simple conversation between choreographer and composer.

At the time of Bonachela's appointment as artistic director, Italian composer Ezio Bosso had just completed his first symphony, *Oceans*. The dramatic score tells a story of migration, nostalgia and the promise of a new start in a new land, a theme subtly mirrored by the Spaniard's own journey to Australia. Using the symphony as a starting point, Bonachela began working with his new company, widening the conversation to include the dancers' own needs and aspirations and using improvisation to weave together a loose narrative of lamentation, longing and liberation.

The resulting choreography is restless and relentless, demanding endurance, speed and considerable upper-body strength from the dancers. Movements have a distinctive, razor-sharp edge – moving away from the weightless flow of classical dance. Some sequences unfold at a break-neck pace, the dancers' movement practically a blur.

The audience is invited to create its own narrative, to project its own meaning onto the abstract journey portrayed by the dancers. The tone of the piece is both frantic and moody, a dark shadow seems to hang over the performers. The body on display is one which betrays its master, crippled by pain, incapacitated by grief, awoken only by love, a desire to connect.

Erected behind the dancers is a massive video wall featuring new work by Sydney filmmaker Daniel Askill. The projected film – which seems to borrow heavily (and without so much as an acknowledgement) from the work of Bill Viola – features five scenes corresponding to the five movements of the symphony. One scene features a dancer's body, crouched under the rain, unfolding in extreme slow-motion until it towers above the stage.

The giant body is then showered in flames, a tableau both shocking and mesmerising. Each scene is stunningly beautiful, an entertaining and evocative experience which could easily stand on its own.

Therein lies one of the problems of *We Unfold*. Askill's video almost demands our undivided attention, if only for its sheer size and surreal beauty. It becomes harder and harder for the dancers on stage to compete with their video avatars, standing five or six times taller than them in crisp high-definition. This contrast, however, is never really acknowledged, let alone woven into the narrative. The live performance competes, but rarely interacts with the show's moving image component.

Another of the show's shortcomings is its hyper-activity. *We Unfold* is a short but frenzied piece which moves forward like an express train, there's not much time to see the sights, to reflect on the journey or its destination. Bonachela seems so focused on our entertainment that his work comes across as almost insecure. The bombastic music, the athletic routines, the larger-than-life video – everything seems designed to banish silence, stillness and intimacy. This makes Bonachela's work a great fit for our over-stimulated generation, shortened attention spans and all, but seems like somewhat of a disservice to the dancers.

Such unrelenting entertainment will win over even the most skeptical viewers, making this piece the perfect entry point for audiences timidly venturing into the realm of contemporary dance for the first time. Sure to be a blockbuster, *We Unfold* is dance at its most heart-quickenning, certainly its most accessible. It may not be the most moving or inspired work to be performed on this stage – what it lacks in subtlety and intimacy it makes up for in virtuosity – but as a way to draw attention to the Sydney Dance Company and its bright new artistic director, it's one hell of a fire starter.

We Unfold plays at Sydney Theatre, Walsh Bay until April 11.

All About

Rafael Bonachela

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Joal said on Thursday

Can't wait to go see this. Why such a short season though??

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