

stage

THE SHOE FITS

SYDNEY DANCE COMPANY'S NEW ARTISTIC CHIEF IS SPURRING CHANGE ON STAGE AND OFF. BY **KATRINA LOBLEY.**

WHEN Rafael Bonachela ditched dancing for choreography four years ago, he marked the turning point by having "A por mas suenos..." (and now for more dreams) tattooed along his forearm.

Now that the Barcelona-born choreographer's wildest dreams have come true with his appointment as the Sydney Dance Company's artistic director, he is planning on more ink – most likely drawn from a poem a friend once wrote to cheer him up. It will be a Spanish phrase that translates as "in love with life and with love itself". It's a lot of words but then Bonachela's always been up for a challenge.

History is swirling around him – the legacy left by founding artistic director Graeme Murphy (whose Australian Ballet collaboration *Firebird And Other Legends* will open in Sydney on April 2), followed by the unexpected death of Murphy's successor, Tanja Liedtke. But for now Bonachela is casting that aside and concentrating on his directorial debut.

We Unfold is still a work in progress as we sprawl on a sofa in his harbourside office, which Bonachela revamped by ripping out the carpet, painting the floor white and adding a wall-length blackboard so he could scribble notes – such as "We are naked, we are what we are" – map out ideas and pin up pictures.

Is he feeling the pressure of his debut? "I always feel the same pressure because I always want to make a better piece than I've made before," he says, speaking as much with his hands as with his mouth.

"I know the history, I know the legacy... but I'm just here to do what I do, which is make work. I just want to make a brilliant piece instead of freaking out about the fact I've just become artistic director of Sydney Dance Company."

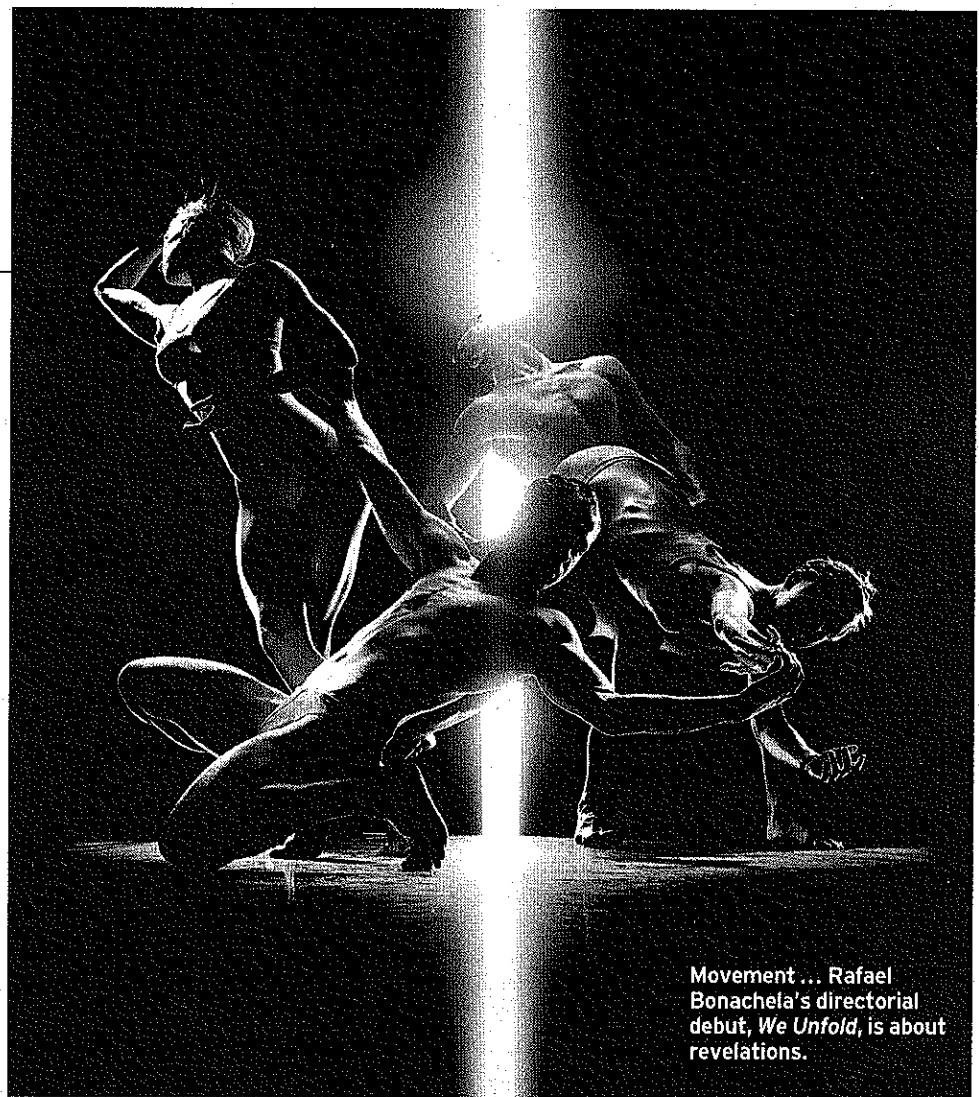
Bonachela, who previously ran his own company in London for three years as well as working with the likes of Kylie Minogue, says the appointment "is something that I really wanted to happen to me".

"When something feels right, it feels like I'm wearing the right shoes that are the right size and the right colour," he says.

Was he auditioning for the job when he made *360 Degrees* last year as a guest choreographer? "At the beginning of the process, never," he says. "I was just making a work." He warmed to the idea "when I actually realised the resources that I could have and the help I could have from being in an environment that's a very established one".

His appointment wasn't without controversy. The ensemble was left intact throughout last year as the company scrambled to find a new artistic director. Bonachela's shake-up was sweeping: seven of 17 dancers were replaced.

"It was fairly stressful but at the same time it had to be done," he says. "There is no way that a new artistic directorship would not mean changes. I had worked with the dancers for three months – I had gone to dinner with them, I had drinks with them, I had shared a lot with them. We had made a wonderful piece of work in *360*."



Movement... Rafael Bonachela's directorial debut, *We Unfold*, is about revelations.

"My decisions were very informed." He started to make *We Unfold* – "it's about blossoming, it's about change, it's about unveiling and taking the coverings off" – by turning to a friend, Italian composer Ezio Bosso. He had used Bosso's work in *360* and "everyone loved it".

"I said, 'Look, you need to help me. I need something really special.' And he said, 'I've just finished composing my first symphony,'" Bonachela says of Bosso's cello piece.

"It's going to be a challenge for me – I have never choreographed to a symphonic piece of music – but this is just the right thing to do."

Bonachela is also collaborating with Australian brothers Daniel (video art) and

Jordan Askill (costumes). He met Jordan first – one of Bonachela's Australian dancers in London gave him the numbers of five best friends in Sydney in return for Bonachela's five best friends in Barcelona. Jordan Askill was heading to Paris to work with Dior so the pair eventually met in London.

"I came here, found Daniel [through his short film *We Have Decided Not To Die*] and then realised he was the brother so it was like, 'This is perfect.' Life can be wonderful that way."

WE UNFOLD

March 27-April 11, various times, Sydney Theatre, Walsh Bay, sydneytheatre.org.au, 9250 1999, \$20-\$70.