



Rafael Bonachela has been inspired by a childhood fascination, writes **Vanessa Keys**

SIGN LANGUAGE

Two memories stand out in Rafael Bonachela's mind from his first sun-soaked week in Sydney three years ago: photographing a hot pink "WRONG WAY GO BACK" sign smack bang in the middle of Redfern, and getting a tattoo.

He can't show the picture of the sign, he apologises, because he's "embarrassingly bad" at keeping all his thousands of photographs in any kind of order. But there's no missing the tattoo; a flurry of calligraphy that stretches from wrist to elbow inside his right arm.

On request, Bonachela translates the Spanish phrase in his lilting accent: "In love with life and with love itself." He smiles unabashedly. "Isn't it perfect?"

The tattoo is the result of a promise Bonachela made to himself three years ago, when he threw in a booming choreography career in London to become artistic director at the Sydney Dance Company, a decision that shocked family and friends (including long-time collaborator Kylie Minogue).

"I just knew that it was time for me to venture down an uncertain path. Jobs like this one here," he says, gesturing around his sun-soaked office overlooking Sydney Harbour, "come up how often? Never! It was a sign."

Signs in all their incarnations have fascinated Bonachela since he was a boy. He photographs the visible signposts that pique his interest and spends hours contemplating those less tangible signposts that influence our inner-most thoughts and decisions.

"That's really where this show, *The Land Of Yes & The Land Of No*, came from; the fact that all day, every day we're being told what to do and we're not even aware of it. Turn right, turn left, queue here, don't smoke, merge ... we don't question them, we just go along with it."

Before he started choreographing, Bonachela gathered his dancers and the composer in the studio where he had taped to the walls hundreds of pictures of signs that he

had collected over the years.

"It all opened up a lot of memories and emotions," Bonachela says.

"Like one dancer who would see 'boarding' signs and instantly have flashes about being terrified to hop on a plane. So we started working on this dance sequence about not being able to breathe. Once we started sharing all our personal experiences and connections to the signs, that is what became the soul and inspiration behind the piece."

When devising the sequence that would explore the ubiquitous "cross" sign, the lines got a little more blurry.

"The more we talked about it, the more we realised how many different connotations a simple cross had," says Bonachela.

"It can illustrate a crossroad, it can also be religious ... so we decided it was about will and chance. Life is about willingness but chance plays a huge part in it.

"We use the signs as a vehicle to enter another world and explore emotions. That's what makes this piece so powerful. Dance can be just dance. But it means so much more when there is reason and emotion behind those movements."

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The Land Of Yes & The Land Of No,
Sydney Theatre, Hickson Rd, Walsh Bay;
October 18-29, \$40-\$75, 9250 1999,
sydneytheatre.org.au



Exploring emotions: SDC artistic director Rafael Bonachela (left) and SDC dancers rehearse their new show Portrait: Katrina Tepper