

A Day in the Life of a Ballet BC Dancer

A Chat with Alexis Fletcher



Dance Victoria spoke with Alexis Fletcher who is in her 14th season with Ballet BC to learn more about being a dancer in this creation-based company that has been touring internationally.

What is a typical day like for you in the company? Do you take a ballet class every day?

Our day is divided between company class and rehearsals. We start everyday with a ballet class from 9:30 to 11:00 a.m. The rest of the day encompasses about six hours of rehearsals with the choreographer that we are working with at the time.

We usually have three weeks of creation time with a choreographer where the first two weeks are fully dedicated to him/her. We may introduce other types of technique in the morning class so that we are sufficiently warmed up, but the technique and basis is always classical ballet. If the repertory has a lot of floor work, we may do a contemporary class, or if the piece is inspired by a certain movement philosophy (for instance Ohad Naharin's *Gaga*), we will start the day with a *Gaga* class.

All of the dancers are trained in classical ballet. It's the foundation for all that we do and influences the way in which we choose to move in the company. You need the roots of ballet to give a certain aesthetic tone to the movement, but also to access the sophistication of the range of movement and choreographic complexity we want to explore. It's a lifelong practice, and at Ballet BC we are constantly exploring and discussing how we take the language of ballet and make it contemporary and for today.

At Ballet BC, we have no hierarchy in the company. Everyone is a soloist. Our Artistic Director, Emily Molnar, has a profound way of articulating our on-going conversation about "*what is contemporary dance?*" and that is a main reason we have been able to grow the company and attract international collaborators and creators. Our conversations center around the idea that contemporary dance is not turning our back on the past and the original classical form and language. Instead, it's a starting place for something new that looks at what movement can be, what abstract narrative can be, and so on. Personally, I feel very inspired by that conversation.

Also, most of the dancers do other forms of cross training outside of company class and rehearsals as part of their physical maintenance and injury prevention, like any professional athlete does. Some are pursuing their own choreography or teach dance, yoga, or are involved in other performance

series. Other dancers have passions they're pursuing such as photography and videography.

How many different works are you typically learning or rehearsing at one time?

We can be working on up to four different pieces in one day. Like right now we are getting ready for shows in Vancouver and a tour, so our days are divided up equally amongst multiple works. We often have additional pieces in the rehearsal that are part of a future show that we need to review and revisit whenever we have time.

How can you remember all that repertoire?

Video is a huge tool. If we leave a work for six months, for instance, video helps us remember the choreography sequences. You become accustomed to having to bring things back very quickly. As dancers, we're always building neuromuscular and cellular memory pathways through repetition with the choreographers. The movement becomes part of you – literally in your cellular memory. When you're constantly switching the choreography, you actually get used to it. We speak a lot about our intentions in the work – the musicality that you want the audience to experience, for example, or where you want their attention to go in a particular moment in the work.

There are lots of opportunities for investigation, which plays a large part in retaining and fully embodying the movement as well.

How do you feel Ballet BC is different than other contemporary dance companies in Canada?

I think our philosophy and mandate of being an entirely creation-based company is unique as well as the amount of collaboration we have done with international choreographers. As dancers, we have huge agency to use our individual voices within the company setting. I think that the way we work with Emily as a group and the way that we work with different dance creators is something different and exciting. Not a lot of companies work this way. There is a lot of focus on the individual development of each dancer as well as the collective as a whole. This is part of the discussion that Emily has introduced as Artistic Director of the company.

The collaborations that we have with many international dance collaborators and creators lend a





really unique vibe to the company. For many of the dance makers, Ballet BC was the first time that they created a work on a company in Canada or the first time that their work has ever been performed in North America. It's incredibly exciting.

How has touring been beneficial for the company?

We have five works currently on tour. Each show that we tour usually has three of the five works in it so it keeps the different pieces fresh and alive on stage. There is a lot of juggling of many moving parts in the schedule and for certain pieces two casts, but it means that the works have a life beyond our

performances in Vancouver. As artists, we get to dive into pieces with more consistency and uncover layers of the work in meaningful ways – and let the work have a life year after year. We have worked hard to build the company to the point where this is possible. It is important for the pieces to have a life of their own. It provides opportunities for experiencing the works in different ways after premiering them.

Touring has allowed us to be ambassadors of art in Canada. We take this very seriously. Our work, at the heart, is all about humanity and transcending borders that are created in the world. It's such a privilege to share these conversations with many different audiences around the world. It becomes less about what country you are in and other issues that may divide us and instead, how we are all human and connected in some way. Sharing our art all over the world helps bring these conversations to many audiences.

Can you give us any insights into the works that will be performed in Victoria in March?

I love the program that we are bringing to Victoria! The music is extraordinary for all the works. There is a huge range of music and movement styles.

Ballet BC has had a long, collaborative relationship with Cayetano Soto. For *BEGINNING AFTER*, the making of the piece was truly a co-creation between him and us, with the majority of the movement made by the dancers. Cayetano has a very specific aesthetic and a unique way of how he places things in the music. He also has a clear visual concept. It's a beautiful piece and we are proud to share it.



For *To this day*, I was honoured to be the choreographer's assistant for this work with Emily. It's to the music of Jimi Hendrix and audiences have been loving it. Emily started with a collage of many images and writings as stimuli for the dancers and assigned tasks associated with those images or tasks based on a particular physical endeavor. Again, it was very collaborative. The dancers created original movement phrases and Emily worked with each dancer to create "sentences of movement" in her own choreographic style. There is lots of "personal quirkiness" in the movement. James Proudfoot did this wonderful lighting design, co-created with Emily, which works really well for the time in which the music was made, but also has a modern feel to it.

Petite Cérémonie by Medhi Walerski was premiered in 2011 and was one of the first pieces that we made when Emily took over (in 2009) and was rebuilding the company's repertoire. Its series of vignettes and tableaux are about sensitivity, joy, humour and a little commentary about relationships. It's important to talk about joy! It is a favourite work to perform. We've done many incarnations of this work with different configurations of dancers and groups. Many original cast members are still in the roles that they performed at its premiere.

Petite Cérémonie will give Victoria audiences a taste of Medhi's choreography in a completely different way than *Romeo + Juliet* next season. It was made at a different time for him as a choreographer. He started with an open canvas and asked us to explore "what would it be like to live your life in a box?"

We love coming to Victoria! We share a lot of the same dance community and we're really looking forward to our performances in March.

Ballet BC performs at the Royal Theatre on March 15 and 16 at 7:30 p.m.
For tickets, call 250-386-6121 or visit DanceVictoria.com.
Ask about Pay Your Age (ages 12 to 29) or Night Moves (ages 30 to 45) tickets.

Photo credits:

- 1) Alexis Fletcher in *BEGINNING AFTER*. Photo by Cindi Wicklund
- 2) Alexis Fletcher. Photo by Michael Slodobian
- 3) Artists of Ballet BC in *Petite Cérémonie*. Photo by Michael Slobodian
- 4) Artists of Ballet BC in *To this day*. Photo by Michael Slobodian