

Ballet's wunderkind brings his genius to Ottawa

William Forsythe leads lean company of 18 out of Ballett Frankfurt ashes

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If there was ever any doubt about William Forsythe's rock-star status, consider his recent transatlantic conference call with a group of Canadian dance writers.

It's an interview arrangement usually extended to Hollywood A-listers or chart-topping recording artists, not choreographers. But Forsythe's time is at such a premium these days that efficiency has to trump intimacy.

In conversation, however, the man whose towering genius has been compared to Mozart's and Balanchine's is anything but a forbidding diva. "Bill," as he prefers to be called, is direct, hip, informal and refreshingly candid. Questioned about his former fascination with MTV and hip-hop, for example, he quips, "I'm so over it. It's boring. I mean, come on. How much booty-shaking can you do?"



**Fabrice Mazliah, Jone San Martin and Amancio Gonzalez dance The Forsythe Company's Quintett, choreographed by company founder William Forsythe. It will be performed this weekend during the company's performances at the NAC.
Joris-Jan Bos Photography**

The 57-year-old agent provocateur is at the top of his game. He's headed to Ottawa this week with his two-year-old Forsythe Company, the troupe he raised out of the ashes of the defunct Ballett Frankfurt. Forsythe was appointed artistic director of Ballett Frankfurt in 1984 and spent two decades at its helm, pushing the boundaries of ballet, developing his own movement vocabulary and creating some of the most original, radically inventive dance of the past 25 years.

Then, in 2004, Ballett Frankfurt became one of the most infamous casualties of Germany's sweeping cuts to arts funding. Forsythe could have packed his bags and gone just about anywhere, including his native U.S. Instead, he stuck it out, secured private and public sponsors and launched his smaller, leaner, independent company a year later.

"There's a lot more time for individuals," he says of going from 40 dancers to just 18. "It's a smaller stable of diverse talent."

The new ensemble also operates on a flat hierarchal system, eschewing traditional dancer ranks. "That's a road that leads you straight to hell," he says.

Forsythe says he chooses his dancers for their independence and "artistic autonomy." ("I'd rather they didn't need me.") He views the choreographic process as "a two-way street" and puts his money where his mouth is: not only does he encourage and prize his dancers' input, he pays them extra for it.

This marks Forsythe's first visit to Ottawa since 1989, and is the only Canadian stop on this North American tour. As an added coup, the NAC has landed the North American premiere of *7 to 10 Passages* from 2000, one of the final stages of *The Questioning of Robert Scott*, an epic brainteaser 20 years in the making.

The company will also perform the opening movement of *Three Atmospheric Studies*. Created in 2005, it's one of Forsythe's most politicized and politicizing works: a thinly-veiled commentary on the Iraq war that begins with the gunshot words "my son was arrested." Forsythe admits there was "a little bit of nervousness" about bringing the work to North America.

Rounding out the program will be Forsythe's 1993 masterpiece *Quintett*, set to Gavin Bryars' haunting *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* and written while the choreographer's wife was dying of cancer.

Over the years, Forsythe's inquisitiveness and intellectual rigour have led him to explore other media. He has produced installations with architects Daniel Libeskind and Tadao Ando, designer Issey Miyake and composer Thom Willems. Last season, the Munich Modern Art Museum presented a major retrospective of his performance, film and installation work.

"I don't feel it's any less choreographic," he says of these extracurricular activities. "My criteria don't slip."

Besides, Forsythe notes, there's a certain snobbishness vis-a-vis dance that needs to be addressed head on. "We're often seen as this analphabetic, disadvantaged younger sibling. I'm like an ambassador to the other metiers to say 'don't ignore us.'"

The Forsythe Company performs Saturday and Sunday at the NAC. Tickets & times, the NAC box office or through TicketMaster, 613-755-1111.

Sunday at 7 p.m. in Le Salon, the NAC also presents a free screening of Forsythe's cult 'table dance,' *One Flat Thing, Reproduced*, as filmed by French director Thierry De Mey. Open to all.