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Photo: Bill Hebert

BalletX Brings Fonte's *Beasts* Alive at the Wilma Theater

by Gregory King

With choreography hailed as highly original and exhilarating by *Dance Europe*, Brooklyn-born choreographer Nicolo Fonte adds dimensions to dance by allowing creative space for lights, sets, and costume—all to bring to life his highly physical and theatrical works. Set for a BalletX premiere on November 18 at the Wilma Theater, his full-length production, *Beasts*, centers on the nature-versus-nurture debate.

In our interview at the Pennsylvania Ballet Studios, Fonte related that, upon artistic investigation and exploration, he became open to the possibility that both nature and nurture shape our humanity. Instead of simply adopting a singular notion of development, he embraced the idea of the person being a blank slate and used movement in *Beasts* to reveal the primal human instinct we all possess.

I watched Fonte casually interact with the BalletX dancers, offering feedback that was sometimes accompanied by a stream of consciousness—a joke about the size of his posterior, a story of something he did yesterday, a reason he didn't like what was just shown to him, an attempt to decrypt the real meaning of the phrase "one last time"—but his tangents were all related with humor, insight, and professionalism because they were always about the work.

Fonte choreographs with imagery: "Birdlike, no sex kitten." Unlike many contemporary choreographers, he never asks his dancers to generate material, but welcomes their physical readiness to extract from what he imparts.

This is not Fonte's first time working with BalletX, and he confessed that both he and artistic director Christine Cox share a mutual interest in creating full evening works that are not necessarily narrative. "I am not interested in creating a new version of *Swan Lake*," he said (after acknowledging that one of his most successful ballets was a re-imagining of *Bolero* for Oregon Ballet Theatre). Fonte explained that success happens when he creates a space to be open with the dancers, and that he hangs onto the philosophy of "killing your darlings!" (an adage he admits does not belong to him).

For those new to this expression, he explained, “It means not holding on so tightly to things you are attached to... letting them go for the greater good.” He continued, “As soon as I was willing to let go, I start engaging with the work in a new and fresh way.”

Fonte expressed his desire to work with classically trained ballet bodies. He spoke of their elasticity and supple backs: “Asking the dancers to use their distorted bodies in different ways is compelling.” This aspect of his aesthetic was particularly obvious to me as I watched a tender solo during which dancer Chloe Felesina retrieved vocabulary from previously-danced movement, realizing Fonte’s vision only to hear the words “good....good....that’s nice!” Her quirky shapes, focused energy, and dynamic technical delivery allowed her to whittle through the space before washing the floors with her fluid and muscled body. Felesina is in touch with her physical terrain and worked from the flutes in the music through her spasming body to reach the animal within.

Set designer and 2015 MacArthur Fellow Mimi Lien poured herself into the project, her second time working with both Fonte and BalletX (in addition to serving as a designer for other Wilma Theater productions). Without revealing too much, I’ll note that the set looms in the space but moves, providing added dimension to the moving wall within a frame.

Fonte articulated his vision for gender-neutral garb adorned with x-ray images and double helixes. He quickly clarified that his idea for neutrality did not mean genderlessness but rather non-specific physical representation of male and female. I’m sure Christine Darch, whose work has clothed the dancers from companies like San Francisco Ballet, Houston Ballet, and Complexions Contemporary Ballet, will masterfully bring his ideas to the stage. As for music, rhythm was Fonte’s main motivating factor for this piece, and he drew his score from varying composers like Henrik Schwartz, Olafur Arnalds, Debussy, and Joby Talbot, to name a few.

Fonte affirmed that *Beasts* should serve as a port of entry for both intellectual questioning and artistic inquiry. With a generous spirit he anticipated that “the audience, if not moved by the music or grabbed by the title, will undoubtedly be seized by the dancing.”

Beasts, BalletX (Nicolo Fonte, choreographer), Wilma Theater, November 18 – 22, www.balletx.org

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