



FRANCESCO VENTRIGLIA
WITH RNZB DANCERS
PHOTO: STEPHEN A COURT

Francesco Ventriglia Celebrating Art and Culture

BY FRANCESCA HORSLEY

Francesco Ventriglia is the new artistic director of the Royal New Zealand Ballet. Francesca Horsley asks him about his approach to programming, the company, dance history and the future.

To take over a national ballet company as its new artistic director is a daunting task. Royal New Zealand Ballet's artistic director Francesco Ventriglia had to hit the ground running, coming into the company's *A Christmas Carol* mid-season last November. Not that you would have known, such was his charm and clear vision.

Now nine months after leaving Milan for Wellington, the 37 year old Italian is once again taking it all in his stride, overseeing the RNZB's biggest production in recent years. With two weeks before opening night, Francesco is busy preparing the company for the world premiere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

He is brimming with enthusiasm as the Royal Ballet's 29-year old celebrated choreographer, Liam Scarlett, puts the finishing touches to his new creation, and Tracy Grant Lord's design and costumes are set to wow audiences.

"It is a new production for our dance company and Liam Scarlett is a star. We are very excited. It is a great combination of energy, commitment and talent from everyone," he says. "Liam's choreography is classical, but with very fast movement. It is a challenge for the dancers with a lot of pointe work, a lot of jumps."

The ballet is set to Mendelssohn's score; the story and design is traditional Shakespeare. "There are lots of fairies and the story is just fun. We talk about love – in different shades, forms, different possibilities but always the love in the end."

Francesco's introduction to the RNZB included touring with the company's *Don Quixote* season in March. That season was no sooner unpacked, than he began working with New Zealand choreographers Andrew Simmons and Neil Ieremia and composers Gareth Farr and Dwayne Bloomfield to produce their two new works *Dear Horizon* and *Passchendaele* for the *Salute* season. *Salute* was made to commemorate NZ's involvement in WW1 and the tour proved a great success.

Francesco says touring with the dancers was a really good chance to get to know them. “I started to understand them one by one, and the dynamic of the company, the balance between the people. I spent a lot of time with them and they really welcomed my vision, my idea, and my code of work, which was really great.”

He takes a warm, custodial approach to his dancers. “You need to support them, you need to work with them day by day and put your hands in their hands and just walk together.” Nevertheless he says, it is important to give dancers the responsibility for their own career, “because the career of the dancers does not just come from the artistic director, or the ballet master, or the choreographer”.

“Sometimes when I do the casting I am here in my office and I write the names on paper. Afterwards maybe I am not sure so I just go into the studio and I sit and watch how they are rehearsing. I just follow the energy in the studio, I follow the artists – I say ‘ok, he is ready to do that; ok, she is not ready to do that’. They decide who will dance, not me.”

Francesco left home as a youngster to train first in Rome and then at the prestigious Ballet School of La Scala in Milan. He joined the world-renowned ballet company of La Scala in 1997 and went on to have a celebrated dance career. He began choreographing work for fellow dancers, creating a number of works, and in 2010 was appointed Director of MaggioDanza in Florence, Italy.

He believes that striking a balance between traditional and contemporary ballet is an essential responsibility for a national ballet company. “If a national company doesn’t do the classic ballet repertoire, they lose everything. The public loves the classics and it is really important for the dancers to put on pointe shoes, tutus and tiaras. The tradition needs to be respected and saved and the national company has the responsibility to do that.”

At the same time, Francesco says there is a responsibility to open the door, to help the public grow, to translate what is happening around the world on stage. History, he says, can be captured and interpreted by artists. “If you watch the performance of 40 years ago, or 30 years ago, you can understand exactly what is happening in that moment around the choreographer and around the composer.”

One of first things he did was to visit Te Papa Museum to learn about Māori art and culture. “I read this amazing statement in Te Papa: ‘Embrace the past, prepare now to shape the future’. I think it is important for new generations to see the past and with that knowledge, build the future. You cannot build the future if you don’t know what is happening in the past.”

The momentum of this year will continue apace. When the *Midsummer* season is completed, the RNZB will leave in late October for an international tour of UK and Italy in November and December. They are taking *Giselle* and a *Mixed Bill*, which includes the NZ works from *Salute* as well as Javier de Frutos’s *Anatomy of Passing Cloud*. They will be performing in Rome, Edinburgh, Leeds, Canterbury, and London.

This, he hopes, will be the first of many tours to Europe. “One of my ideas is to build a bridge between NZ and Europe – Europe and NZ. I bring something from Europe and I can send something to Europe from NZ – an exchange.” ■

RNZB SALUTE - DEAR HORIZON
PHOTO: ELLIE RICHARDS



RNZB SALUTE - PASSCHENDAELE
PHOTO: ELLIE RICHARDS

