

Below: Dancers of Ballet Nacional Chileno and Ballet de Santiago in Mathieu Guilhaumon's *Les Noces*.

Fátima Nollén introduces Chile's Ballet de Santiago and the Ballet Nacional Chileno



Chile took longer than other South American countries to develop its own ballet, and it went about it in the opposite way to what happened elsewhere: contemporary dance came first, followed, later, by classical ballet. Despite visits by ensembles such as De Basil's Ballet Russe, it was the Kurt Jooss company that left its mark on Chile in 1940. Some of its dancers – Ernst Uthoff, Lola Botka and Rudolf Pescht – were given the opportunity to set up a dance school at the University of Chile's Institute of Music Extension (today the Centro de Extensión Artística y Cultural or CEAC), which opened in 1941. At the time, Chile was far away from the war in Europe, was friendly and, as a nation, almost a dance virgin. Later, Uthoff formed a company – the Ballet Nacional Chileno – that danced his version of *Coppélia* in 1945. Jooss himself returned for six months in 1948 to teach and stage some of his famous works, including *The Green Table*.

Today, Ballet Nacional Chileno is known as BANCH, which has been led by French-born choreographer Mathieu Guilhaumon since 2013. "I found in BANCH a good group who were eager to work, but I needed a certain style from them to make my vision possible", Guilhaumon tells me in perfect Spanish. "I needed a company with a really strong technical

base, so renewal was natural. I wanted to nurture what already existed, but bring something different – a touch of what was being done in Europe that didn't exist in Chile", explains the artistic director of the 20-strong contemporary ensemble. Originating from both Chile and abroad, the dancers have a firm classical base, but mainly perform abstract pieces. Among the few narrative works is Guilhaumon's *Alicia* (based on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*), which played to great acclaim in 2014 and was revived last year. Last month he revisited the classic *Giselle*.

Guilhaumon considers his biggest achievement in Chile to be a danced version of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, a collaboration with three of CEAC's ensembles (BANCH, the orchestra and the choir). A powerful work that marked BANCH's 70th anniversary, it commemorated the end of World War II but also offered a subtle insight into Chile's suffering during the dark days of the Pinochet dictatorship.

BANCH's dancers are versatile, powerful and artistically committed, and, remarks Ignacia Peralta, a leading company dancer, they appreciate "the doors Mathieu has opened for them. After five years in France, I decided to return to Chile. Mathieu's artistic vision for the company was very attractive and I had experienced his work in Paris. We are a solid group that has

learned the way each individual dances. Mathieu brought a new language, new tools and knowledge, and his works are beautiful. More important, he gave us the chance to work with foreign choreographers."

Among the guest choreographers for 2018 is UK-born Ihsan Rusten. "I'm looking forward to working with BANCH, my first South American commission, in November", Rusten says. He has heard wonderful things about the company from other choreographers and knows its dancers "are fearless and dance from the heart."

Marietta Santi, the critic and editor of *Tiempo de Danza*, thinks Guilhaumon has "updated BANCH and immersed the company into global trends within the contemporary dance world through complex creations that are non-narrative but full of symbolism. *Poesia del Otro*, performed in 2017 and dedicated to the sculptor Camille Claudel is an example of that", she says. "Guilhaumon has also elevated the quality of the dancers. On stage, one can see personality and virtuosity".

BANCH tours around Chile and to other South American countries, but Guilhaumon's dream is to bring the company to Europe. He thinks "it's difficult but not impossible; that's why I'm working on a repertoire and

finding a company identity that can be sold abroad". BANCH also has educational programmes aimed at attracting new, younger audiences.

The company's current season continues in August with *Homage to Debussy*, a new creation by Caroline Finn, resident choreographer of National Dance Company Wales. Before that, *1-2-3-4-5-6*, an exploratory piece for up to six dancers made by Eduardo Zúñiga and Guilhaumon, will be performed next month.

Back in 1958, Octavio Cintolesi, a former Uthoff dancer, returned to Chile from Europe to create a new ballet company with the Yugoslavian ballerina Irena Milovan (who later founded the Escuela Municipal de Danza). As Ballet de Arte Moderno, or BAM, it received financial support from the municipal government and later became known as the Ballet de Santiago (BdS). National and international consolidation occurred when Ivan Nagy, former principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre, became artistic director in 1982.

Now, the biggest asset of BdS is its current artistic director, the Brazilian-born Marcia Haydée, who has led the company since 2004 (she was previously director between 1993 and 1994 as well). It is perhaps inevitable, having a director who was once the muse of the choreographer John Cranko, and who succeeded him as director of the Stuttgart Ballet after his death in 1973, that BdS shares Stuttgart's heritage, both in repertoire and style. However, the company also draws on the influence of Maurice Béjart, John Neumeier and Kenneth MacMillan, as Haydée also worked with those revered choreographers and, at the age of 81, she still imparts their style to her lucky dancers.

The current repertoire not only includes Cranko's *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Onegin*, but Béjart's *Gaité parisienne*, *Bolero* and *The Magic Flute*, MacMillan's *Mayerling* and *Manon*, George Balanchine's *Serenade* and *The Four Temperaments* and Ronald Hynd's *The Merry Widow* and *Coppélia* as well. It also has a range of works by Latin-American choreographers such as Mauricio Wainrot, Luis Ortigoza and Chile's own Jaime Pinto, who staged a new

version of *Don Quixote* in March. His traditional *Nutcracker* will be taken on tour to Bogotá, Colombia, in December.

Haydée herself has restaged a number of the classics, including *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty*, and she will do so again with *Cinderella* in October, but what are her objectives for BdS? "In 2004 I wanted a repertoire of the classics, neoclassical works and modern pieces, and also to bring in new choreographers," Haydée replies. "I wanted BdS to be an open company with open-minded dancers, something that today is indispensable. That's why we started working with BANCH three years ago with the *Festival of Choreographers*. BANCH was invited to dance here; last year, Mathieu created a fantastic piece for both companies, Stravinsky's *Les Noces*."

Can we say BdS has similarities with Stuttgart Ballet, then? "It has lots in common with Cranko's Stuttgart Ballet. Not only is the classical technique there, but when the curtain goes up, you feel a special energy, a joy, something that goes beyond being a great dancer. As the Germans once said of us: Chileans put their hearts into their feet to dance. What Cranko wanted from Stuttgart I found here. I brought a repertoire of the choreographers I worked with for many years, and this company dances them very well. So I think I already have what I want from BdS. We have incredible dancers like Romina Contreras, a very young talent who I promoted to principal last year; she reminds me of Sylvie Guillem."

Haydée is thinking of returning to

Germany, but hasn't done so yet because the new director of the Teatro Municipal, Frédéric Chambert, asked her to stay on so he could work with her. "I didn't have the right to say no," Haydée says. She continues to perform, and lives her life following the opportunities that come along. Her intuition tells her "the best is yet to come."

A lot can be said about the Chilean backbone of BdS in the person of its current deputy director, Luz Lorca. She has worked with the company for nearly 40 years and was pivotal in its development. A dancer under Cintolesi, Lorca was later made director of the Escuela de Ballet del Teatro Municipal de Santiago, as well as deputy and director of the company, although she stood aside in order to invite both Nagy and Haydée to lead the ballet. "During Nagy's tenure, big reforms took place," Lula – as she is known – informs me. "He helped develop a real company, and changed the mentality towards us from outside Chile due to the dictatorship under which we were living. People didn't trust us, but Nagy brought in

