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# Pleasure and pain: Choreographer Josh Beamish explores love's challenges with a stellar ballet collective

## Vancouver Playhouse hosts the world premiere of pierced

Deborah Meyers, Special to The Sun

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### World premiere of pierced

*MOVE: the company/Joshua Beamish*

Sept. 7 at 8 p.m. and Sept. 8 at 2 p.m. | Vancouver Playhouse



**Josh Beamish [M] watches the dancers at Vancouver's Scotiabank Dance Centre during rehearsal for his upcoming work called pierced.**

Ward Perrin

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Tiny arrows are whizzing through the air at the Scotiabank Dance Centre. That's what Josh Beamish wants you to see when you watch this sequence in his new full-length work, *pierced*. He's been working on this 38-second section for the better part of an hour, in the weakening late August sun of a Sunday morning. Jo-Ann Sundermeier, Sophia Lee and Lindsie Dec, exquisite creatures on loan from the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and Pacific Northwest Ballet, are on point, doing that quivering ballet step called a *bouffée*. Beamish is in front of them, working his upper body in deeply accented and segmented isolations. "It's like getting Tasered, but it's a really great experience," he calls back to them. "Arrows are coming out of my elbows and fingers and toes."

It's both fitting and touching that the subject of *pierced* is the tension between what Beamish calls "the romanticism of love, and the arduous process of maintaining love." The 25-year-old Kelowna-born choreographer had his own very public breakup with the city of Vancouver in January 2012, when he left in a blaze of publicity, declaring he was done with this town due to its lack of support for artists.

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"When I left, I was really heartbroken," he says. "I was so at a loss here, trying to build something. There are so many fine training institutions here, and so few jobs. I was frustrated. I wanted to focus on improving my craft. A week later, I got an email from Andre Lewis, artistic director of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, offering to partially fund *pierced* by providing me with dancers who are paid by RWB to be part of the project."

He relocated to New York City, where his entrepreneurial approach to dance, tenacity and talent quickly led to new opportunities. A creation grant from the Jerome Robbins Foundation was a major building block. So was meeting New York City Ballet principal dancer Wendy Whelan in a ballet class he started attending after making a work for the School of American Ballet in 2010. They discovered they shared a birthday, and an artistic approach. The *pas de deux* he made for her with NYCB principal Robbie Fairchild became the centrepiece and impetus for *pierced*.

It wasn't a one-off: his *Waltz Epoca* for Whelan premiered at the Jacob's Pillow dance festival in Massachusetts this August, part of Whelan's *Restless Creature* program of duets by four up and coming choreographers. It's the kind of exposure Beamish thrives on, and it can only happen in a

dance centre like New York, where presenters from Jacob's Pillow, the Joyce Theatre and other dance facilities regularly attend open rehearsals, scouting for new talent.

But Vancouver remains a second home. His *MOVE*: the company is based here, and he comes here regularly to teach, at schools like Goh Ballet Academy and the Richmond Academy of Dance. In some ways, his connection to young dancers in Vancouver is even stronger than when he lived here.

"It's fantastic, and sad," he reflects. "People pay attention to me now that I'm not here."

But this is more than the story of an individual dance maker: It reflects a sea change in the way many emerging choreographers now work. The days of a fixed address and stable company are long gone.

"It's now nearly impossible," Beamish says, "to sustain a career as a creator in one place. You need to travel to teach, to set works, to pool resources. That's the new reality. I will likely continue my mobile, nomadic existence. And that's OK."

*pierced*, like all of Beamish's work to date, is highly autobiographical.

"Love can be so dark and lonely," he says. "I was struck by the fact that you are sometimes never more alone than when you are lying next to another person. You're either in love with someone who is not in love with you, or you don't feel the same way about each other at the same time. It makes you appreciate the beauty of those fleeting moments of bliss."

The 70-minute piece features six dancers gathered from multiple ballet companies, plus Beamish. It is built around three pas de deux, to which are grafted solos, a men's ensemble dance and what he calls a "giant eight-minute women's group." The dance language riffs on the words we use to talk about love: falling in and out of love, bleeding heart, love sick.

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To this end, Beamish works the contrast between his own contemporary style and the flow of ballet, "which is articulate in such a specific way. It completes the line. So in a way it is the opposite of what I do, which is ask: How can I break it down? How can I segment it? That was the process I played with using the Jerome Robbins commission: bringing those two worlds together."

He is grateful for platforms to workshop early versions of *pierced* in Vancouver at *Dancing on the Edge* and *Dances for a Small Stage*. He is effusive in his admiration for his chosen dancers, says David Lang of *Bang on a Can*, who wrote the music to which the work is set, is his "all-time favourite composer," and sings the praises of former Vancouverite Mike Inwood, who is doing the lighting for *pierced*.

Back in the studio, he is a force field of ideas on how to make the arrow sequence speak the way he wants it to. His approach is deeply improvisational, and he's working hard to get these beautiful,

classically trained dancers to play along with him. He wants it to be less flowy. He wants more use of directions and rotations. He wants them to take it to the floor, "like bowling pins." He's choreographing, dancing in and producing this show, a formidable set of responsibilities, but in the moment, he is nowhere but right here in the room.

"Over embellish it," he suggests. "Blow up the idea. Start small and build. But you only have 38 seconds."

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