

Simone Orlando soars again at helm of Ballet Kelowna

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- Ballet Kelowna dancers Heather Thompson and Mark Dennis John perform John Alleyne's *Split House Geometric*. Simone Orlando

In the late 2000s, star ballerina Simone Orlando suffered the kind of career-ending injury that would send lesser human beings into a fetal ball. Instead, the former Ballet BC dancer, a favourite who once took the leads in shows like *A Streetcar Named Desire*, refocused herself, enrolling for business-management studies at BCIT while she built up her choreography.

Today, she is the proud artistic director and CEO of Ballet Kelowna, a blossoming company that's moved into its own big, new facility in that Interior town. The troupe also enjoys an ambitious touring schedule that brings the art form to communities around the province—and that finally visits Vancouver with exciting new contemporary repertoire this month.

"It couldn't have wound up any more perfectly," the artist and administrator admits, speaking to the *Straight* from Kelowna, where she moved to take the position almost immediately upon graduating in 2014. Reflecting on her severe hip injury, she adds: "As devastating and as dark a period as it was to go through, and not knowing what the future would hold, I certainly wouldn't have landed here if I hadn't have taken that leap and

said, 'Simone, you're going to have to redefine yourself and get yourself back into school and make yourself employable.'"



Simone Orlando

Orlando chose to specialize not in nonprofit management, but in money-minded business—a decision that could only have come from the other trauma she experienced at the exact same time she was dealing with the pain of a destroyed hip: Ballet BC filing for bankruptcy protection and shutting down in 2009 (a setback it's since overcome).

"I was in Ballet BC the day that the board came into the studio and announced that the company was ceasing operations, and it came right out of left field," she recalls. "In that moment I was like, 'Oh my God, this company may not exist.' Maybe that's what sparked that interest in trying to understand how could I be helping dance in this province."

Today, Ballet Kelowna has built a strong base in the Interior and has toured to more than 60 B.C. communities, often introducing viewers to dance. With only six dancers, it's nimble, able to perform in smaller venues that bigger companies could never fit into. Once it moved into its own building from its original digs at the Canadian School of Ballet last fall, it was able to host in-studio events, teach adults the art form, and offer choreographers ample room to create. "It's just elevated the quality of what we're doing," explains Orlando.

"Some days it's pretty nuts," she admits with a laugh about her workload. "I do everything from preparing budgets and grant proposals to rehearsing the company, and I choreograph for the company—I even do the company's laundry after a performance!"

Orlando has found a fine combination of contemporary work that balances audience tastes with high artistic quality, always with a mandate to foster Canadian talent. Just look at the Renaissance program coming here as part of the Chutzpah! Plus series: it features world premieres by Orlando herself and Boston Ballet and

Nederlands Dans Theater alumna Heather Myers; James Kudelka's *Byrd Music*; and *Split House Geometric*, created by her former director at Ballet BC, John Alleyne.

All of the scores on the program are inspired by early music—though the pieces are written by cutting-edge composers like B.C.'s Rodney Sharman (Kudelka's work) and Jocelyn Morlock (Orlando's piece). The compositions will be performed live by Toronto's Continuum Contemporary Music—part of Orlando's goal to look for more bold creative collaborations for her company.

In all, the show is just a first look by Vancouverites at the dreams Orlando has for the company—dreams that have come with a lot of business analysis and hard work.

There's a discipline and drive here that clearly must have its roots in the dance studio. And Orlando agrees: "I really feel all of that energy and commitment that I had for my job as a professional dancer I've been able to channel that into helping a company to succeed."

Chutzpah! Plus presents Ballet Kelowna's Renaissance at the Norman and Annette Rothstein Theatre from Wednesday to Friday (May 4 to 6).