

Deirdre Kelly meets Sabrina Matthews, the rising choreographer who will create new work for Genée in Toronto

# Fly on the wall



Something to say... Sabrina Matthews  
Photo: Clay Stang

It's a Friday afternoon at the neighbourhood Starbucks, and probably for the first time all day, dancer-turned-choreographer Sabrina Matthews is sitting stock still. One of those dusky long-necked lovelies you could imagine Modigliani, in an earlier day, immortalising in one of his archly sensual paintings, she might not be moving, but the tilt of her head, not to mention the penetrating look of her inky eyes, make it clear that her mind is getting a workout.

## *'I created my first work on a dare'*

A graduate of Canada's National Ballet School, and from 1995-2005, a captivating soloist with Alberta Ballet whose signature role, perhaps not surprisingly given her

tenacity, was Carmen, Matthews intently studies her surroundings, listening in on conversations, examining dress codes and habits, as well as the body language of the lone wolf in a hoodie, glaring into his cell phone.

The 30-year old could be mistaken for a fly on the wall, except for the orange sweater she is wearing, which makes her seem like a pop of colour in an otherwise predictable sea of black. As Matthews says herself, life is for exercising your right to exist, and, in her case, exist unconventionally, if not volubly, outside the pretty parameters of the storybook ballets in which she grew up – literally so, considering that she took her first stage turn as a child, dancing Clara in the National Ballet of Canada's production of Celia Franca's *The Nutcracker*, in 1989. Now existing primarily as a choreographer,

Matthews possesses a talent whose strength lies in her ability to distil emotional truths from keenly observed everyday scenarios, translating them into ballets of transient beauty.

'I'm creating abstract work,' she says, holding a cup of coffee, but not really drinking, her focus more on the tics and talks of her fellow human beings, gadflying about her. 'I'm capturing an energy,' she continues, glancing over her shoulder at the loner at the nearby table, her voice soft but steady. 'I'm translating into dance a feeling of longing.'

## *Matthews' strength lies in distilling emotional truths from everyday scenarios*

Come August, Matthews will showcase some of that sublimated desire, her specialty, in an upcoming dance she is creating especially for the Genée International Ballet Competition, unfolding this year in Toronto, next door to her birthplace of Mississauga, Ontario. The as-yet-untitled piece will constitute the contemporary portion of an event that tests the skill and artistry of dozens of young RAD students from around the world. While the classical dance component is wide open, with competitors choosing from established choreography to best show off their ability, everyone in competition must dance the contemporary piece; a solo, that Matthews is creating. But to hear Matthews explain it, you wonder who'll find it harder – the dancers trying to master her idiosyncratic vocabulary of knee crawls and spiralling lifts, or the choreographer, used to working with small groups of hand-picked dancers, usually the best of the best?

'They expect to have 50 to 60 girls alone,' says Matthews, her eyes widening large as the plastic lid on her paper coffee cup. 'I don't ever get them in one group, and so I will have to do the dance in sections. Normally, I create directly on dancers whose bodies I know, and so this will be a challenge.' Adding to the, shall we say, excitement of the evening, a live pianist will be on stage, accompanying the dancers. And there isn't just one solo; there are two, one for the boys and one for the girls. Each will be different, Matthews says, to showcase what male and female dancers do, and do distinctly. The only thing uniting them will be the music, likely a Mozart piano solo, or so Matthews thought when we spoke five months before her work for Genée was scheduled to debut.

The reason she hadn't yet pinned the musical choice down was that she hasn't had a chance. She's been busy of late, far busier than even she had expected to be for having fully embraced the brave new world of choreography a mere three years earlier. A recipient of the 2005 Clifford W Lee Choreography Award, a coveted Canadian dance award, Matthews had just returned from Europe, visiting the heads of several large ballet companies who had asked to see her following the stupendous reception given *Soles*, a pas de deux commissioned by fellow Canadian Reid Anderson for his Stuttgart Ballet in 2006. The following day, she was expected to be back on a plane, this one headed south, to work with Boston Ballet on remounting *Ein von viel* (One of Many), a male duet set to *The Goldberg Variations*, that she created in 2001 when still an Alberta Ballet dancer.

Boston Ballet director Mikko Nissinen had mentored Matthews in the creation of the work when, from 1998-2001, he was head of Alberta Ballet and noticed she could do a lot more than just dance. 'Actually, I created my first work on a dare,' offers Matthews, her easy smile betraying a delight in risk-taking, a characteristic that served her well as a dancer whom critics described as being endowed with 'spirited commitment and prowess.' She continues, 'The company had annual choreographic workshops and a friend one day just said to me, why aren't you putting something in? You've got the studio and the dancers. You've got everything going for you. But I was so terrified. I had always avoided choreographing because I thought there's no way I could do it.'

### 'I'm translating into dance a feeling of longing'

Well, thank goodness for know-it-all friends. Matthews not only survived her creation of a two-minute solo called *Unknown Territory* ('I was practically throwing up, as the curtain went up, I was so scared,' Matthews confesses), Nissinen saw it, and instantly encouraged her to make another work, this one for an Alberta Ballet fundraiser. 'He would later take me aside and talk to me about the work,' Matthews recalls. 'He'd ask me to think of the positive aspects, the negative aspects. He taught me how to look at my own work objectively, and for that I definitely have to thank him.'

After Nissinen left the company, the Canadian choreographer Jean Grand-Maitre took over and similarly commissioned Matthews to create additional work for Alberta Ballet. He continued the requests following her decision to quit the company in 2005 to devote herself full-time to nurturing an independent career in Montreal, Canada's experimental hotbed of new choreographic

creation. In published interviews about his protégée, Grand-Maitre praised Matthews for eschewing the trends, and following her own vision, which doesn't always bode well for young choreographers hungry for work: 'When you want to develop your own vernacular that's instantly recognisable, it can take eight to 10 years. Sabrina's not taking any shortcuts. She's really taking the long road to discover her way of choreographing and how she wants to say things. And she really has something to say.'

Well, right and wrong. While she indeed has something to say in dance, and say it with passion, she hasn't needed a decade to get herself noticed. Matthews, one of just a handful of females working in her profession, is now a hot commodity. In addition to Alberta, Boston, Stuttgart and Genée, in

February it was announced that Matthews had also just scored a commission from the National Ballet of Canada's Karen Kain to create a new work for its March 2009 season. The content of that work is yet to be determined. But if the dance features a hoodie, a cell phone and the feeling of a caffeine high, don't be surprised. Where Matthews and her taste for heightened states of being are concerned, the Starbucks, you could say, are the limits.

For more details about Genée in Toronto, including booking information and an exclusive evening with Dame Antoinette Sibley, see page 27



Capturing an energy... Matthews in rehearsal (above) and John Lam and pianist Freda Locker in *Ein von Viel* (below; Boston Ballet; Photo: Gene Schiavone)

