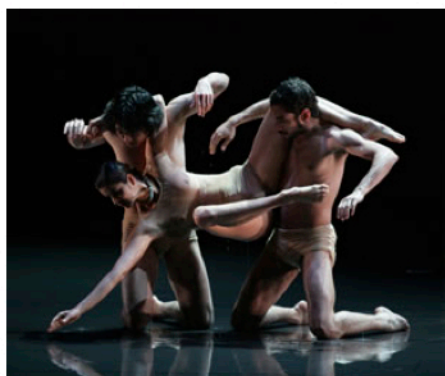


Alas | Compania Nacional de Danza

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Photos - Fernando Marcos

Inspired by Wim Wenders 1987 film, *Wings of Desire*, **Alas** revolves around the plight of *Damiel*, the angel who longs to join the world of the living, where mortals breathe, feel and touch. **Nacho Duato**, artistic director of Spain's **Compania Nacional de Danza**, plays the anguished *Damiel* and also choreographs this emotionally-charged work. **Duato**, who has led this company since 1990, is renowned for his ability to create "supple liquid movement" utilising the entirety of the body. This is certainly evident in this production where dancers seamlessly weave in and out, around and through each other's bodies, even using their elbows and knees. The company, who has been through significant phases in its history in developing its own unique style, has been able to reach its pinnacle with **Duato's** vision and profound imagination. Though all trained in the disciplines of ballet, the dancers allow

themselves to enter other realms where classical traditions are upturned, distorted and fused with other styles.

Alas is also a collaboration with Slovenian theatre director, **Tomaz Pandur**, who with **Duato**, also designed the minimalist set featuring a tower-like structure with an internal scaffolding in which the dancers climb and balance on. This internal framework is covered by a surface which in different lighting set-up's, is thin enough to reveal the silhouettes inside, but solid enough to act as a screen in which to project words and images. The tower also grounds the set in its magnitude and emanates an ethereal quality with its luminous white light.

Featuring direct excerpts from Wenders' philosophical film, predominantly spoken live by **Duato** in Spanish as he writhes and contorts, this is a very dramatic piece of work. **Duato** becomes an actor as much as a dancer with his eloquent reciting revealing as much of his character's loneliness and pain, as his tormented presence on stage. The fact that the audience can hear his panting, the rustling of his clothes, and the squeaking of his skin across the floor, adds to the organic feel of this work.

Although based on a narrative, **Alas** is not to be taken too literally, though it is naturally tempting when confronted by transcripts on a screen directly above the stage. Here too though, the monologue is more poetic and abstract than realistic. Moods and emotions are nevertheless strongly evoked in the mesmerising performances of the dancers, in particular, by **Duato**, coupled with the dynamic musical score including **Arvo Pärt's** meditative *Fratres*, **Jules**

Massenet's moving *Elegie*, as well as original music by Spanish composers, **Pedro Alcalde** and **Sergio Callebro**. The movement too reflects the tension in the decision *Damiel* has to make between leaving his immortal spiritual world, to become vulnerable and exposed to the ills of the physical world. Segments also depict the beauty of the living; the sensuality, passion and exhilaration of being alive, as well as the contradictions of human behaviour. At one point, we see a group of couples holding a broadsheet together. It is a newspaper one minute, then a bed sheet in which they hide under, and then, a pillow in which the men disturbingly use to muffle the faces of their female partners.

In keeping with the raw nature of the piece, costumes by **Angelina Atlagic** are simple and clean with predominantly nude-coloured fitted shorts for men and loose slips for women, accentuating their supple and athletic bodies. The only real flamboyance is a long tulle skirt used to evoke tactility and lightness. The skirts are also used as another way of defying ballet traditions, as the women wearing them tip themselves upside down, and stick out their bare legs with feet flexed in different directions like lifeless dolls.

The piece de resistance is the water ballet in the closing act. *Damiel*, in an act of cleansing, is bathed by a torrent of water directly above him. He twists and turns his body to the cascade, exposing the palms of his hands, his naked back and the soles of his feet. As the light creeps up to reveal the rest of the stage, we realise that the entire floor has become submerged in several inches of water. The dancers glide in, their feet skidding through the water, creating waves and ripples with their swirling motions. Reflections bounce on the ceiling of the theatre creating a feeling of being underwater as the soundtrack becomes dotted with soothing swishing sounds. It is the ultimate marriage of choreography, music and design, transcending into a magical experience. Though it is a scene of serenity, **Duato** depicts a rather bleak demise for *Damiel*, who ultimately ends up alone, as the remaining dancers, in a complete reverse from the opening, watch on from the glowing tower like angels.

Sydney Festival presents

Alas

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