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Chris Handy

ROLL BOUNCE *'If I Were a Sushi Roll'* provides both absurdity and a thought-provoking critique of the internet age.

WRAP IT UP

Smuin Ballet thinks outside the bento box with *'If I Were a Sushi Roll'*

BY AVI SALEM

A FEW YEARS back, choreographer Val Caniparoli was doing something he often does when looking for inspiration: turning to YouTube. Always in search of the unusual, he ended up coming across the perfectly bizarre jumping-off point for his next ballet.

It was an album, which vividly imagined the emotionally rich, underlying back stories behind the millions of seemingly mundane videos uploaded to YouTube every year.

Titled *Confessions*, the 2016 album is a collaboration between American composer Nico Muhly

and Faroese singer-songwriter Tietur, and includes support from the Holland Baroque Ensemble. *Confessions* also serves as the central influence and narrative backbone for Caniparoli's latest endeavor with the Smuin Contemporary American Ballet: *If I Were A Sushi Roll*.

"It's always a dream to find a title that just works perfectly, but also piques the audience's interest," explains Caniparoli, who pulled the ballet's unconventional title from "Don't I Know You From Somewhere"—a song on *Confessions* that also serves as the score for one of the ballet's most animated ensemble routines. The song ponders what life would be like from the perspective of a sushi roll ("If I were a sushi roll traversing through a

Japanese kitchen, I would mostly be fascinated by the people there") and the dance reflects the exploration of such an absurdity through animated movements that meld classical ballet with more contemporary dance.

"That lyric is such a provocative thought, so I went with it as my point of departure," Caniparoli says. "The music was originally written as a commentary on how boring YouTube videos were when the site first came out, and the whole premise of the album was exploring the banal. The ballet is a reflection of that music and my thoughts on the music."

Not only unconventional by name, *Sushi* is also atypical in its structure: Instead of the customary narrative story format that ballets often follow, the performance is split up into nine vignettes that each tell a distinct story and express different emotions from the dancers. One constant throughout the performance is the ever-looming presence of a surveillance camera that watches the performers from the top left corner of the backdrop. The camera flashes red during the entire performance, indicating that the dancers are being watched. This,

in turn, affects the ways in which they interact on stage.

The voyeuristic nature of watching, whether it's viewing a stranger's personal video on YouTube or observing dancers performing on stage, is central to *Sushi*'s theme and is something Caniparoli had in mind when choreographing the ballet. Forcing the audience to observe a performance that is also being surveilled leaves the viewer wondering: who are the dancers really performing for? This meta-meaning was originally part of the reason Caniparoli was inspired by Teitur and Muhly's score.

"Back in the day, we were so naive when it came to the internet. We would film everything, hacking wasn't an issue and privacy wasn't thought about in the same ways we think about it now," he says. "The ballet is made up of a lot of different scenes, but with the theme of being watched, filming yourself or being filmed at the center of it all."

Outside of the deeper commentary the ballet makes, *If I Were a Sushi Roll* is simply funny, which is not often the norm when it comes to the ballet. In "Dog and Frog," four dancers make animalistic gestures—barking and bouncing around the stage with their bodies; in "Small Spaces," solo dancer Ben Needham-Wood propels himself across stage, twisting and turning his body until it curls up and conforms itself into a bento box, resting in place alongside soy sauce as a piece of pickled ginger. It's nonsensical, but it's also strangely profound.

Through meticulously choreographed movement, clever stage design, and polished costuming, Caniparoli adds a further layer of imagination to the songs and lyrics Teitur and Muhly wrote, breathing new life into an already amusing concept. Ultimately, he hopes that audiences, especially young people, will come see the ballet and draw their own conclusions.

"In ballet, everything's been done already—it's just how you present it," Caniparoli explains. "Ballet shouldn't be a stuffy art form. We have to get people to see this stuff."

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