

The Next Big Thing

Aszure Barton and Artists

Reviewed by Elsa Johnson & Victor Lucas

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We've been decrying the dearth of professional ballet in Northeast Ohio for some time now, ever since Ohio Ballet folded in the summer of 2006, but recent developments in the local dance scene and the nature of ballet performance nationwide have rendered a change that we must acknowledge.

Is ballet dead? Nationally and locally that was the question. If ballet's not dead nationally, what — or who — is the next big thing? And if ballet isn't dead locally, where's the next professional local ballet company?

All was made clear last Saturday night at the Ohio Theatre where we watched Aszure Barton and Artists perform, a veritable epiphany.

The *piece de resistance* was *Busk*, an episodic piece whose world premiere had occurred only last December at the Barishnikov Arts Center. In its music — Gypsy violin by Ljova and the Kontraband and choral music in Swedish — and in much of its costuming, gesture, and set design, *Busk* evoked street performers, buskers.

In a kind of prologue, Barton herself entered wearing white gloves like a street mime. She performed an eclectic dance that borrowed from mime, among other forms, and referenced street performers.

As her prologue ended, the curtain started to come down; with precise, practiced timing Barton ran and slid under the curtain and waved to the audience from a spotlight on the apron. The gimmick, which brought smiles and applause from the audience, harked back to Barton's teenage years in dance competition and revealed her formula for the rest of *Busk*: throw the kitchen sink if necessary, but surprise and entertain.

In interviews and press releases, Barton insisted that the title, *Busk*, referred back to the Spanish word *buscar*, to seek. Questionable etymology but apparently Barton's way of saying that — episodic and gimmicky though it is — *Busk* is an inquiry into the nature of performance.

After Barton's prologue, the curtain quickly went back up on the ensemble, only nine dancers in all, dancing in dark coats. Lighting design by Nicole Pearce (who did her undergraduate work in Theatre at Kent State University, where she graduated Cum Laude) suggested rainy streets. Choral music in Swedish provided motivation for the dancers to stand on the little staircase that Barton had entered on and mime multi-part singing. Remember Repertory Project performing

Doug Varone's *Bench Quartet*? This was the same idea on a larger scale. Toward the end of this segment, one of the dancers rode across the stage on a unicycle, another amusing gimmick.

The street choir was followed by one of the men dancing to *pizzicato* violin, his solo punctuated by mad, cackling laughter.

The hooded ensemble lay down to sleep face down in a pile; the audience chuckled as the sleepers' hips waved side to side.

Temporarily abandoning the premise of here-we-are-on-the-street-sleeping-in-a-pile-to-keep-warm, one of the women — the redhead — entered in white shorts and halter-top and performed a solo full of back bends and splits.

Another acrobatic solo; a mirrored disco ball was lowered from the fly space and lit another solo and an ensemble dance; another white-gloved solo, this one by one of the men; a little juggling; a girl in white danced a solo referencing *Dying Swan*. As the final curtain came down a single white feather floated down from the fly space.

So, what is the nature of performance, according to Barton and artists? Beyond the continual dialogue between “What can we do next?” and “This will slay ‘em!” there was a pervasive sense of energetic fun and lots of delicious, eclectic dancing.

The “delicious” dancing is much harder to talk about than the gimmicks. All Barton's dancers have notable facility and everything they did — no matter how technical or acrobatic, eclectic, idiosyncratic or balletic — everything got tossed off with great energy and finesse and flowed together both technically and choreographically.

The program opened with *Les Chambres des Jacques*, Jack-in-the-Box, a dance very similar to *Busk* but — if possible — even more overflowing with energy in its gestures, facial expressions, galumphing folk dance, and ballet steps.

And our epiphany is, the next big thing in the living world of ballet turns out to be — at least some of the time — small. The small company of first-rate dancers is the new performance model, small groups with choreography informed by ballet but not limited to it.

Big ballet companies will continue to exist — probably — and may continue to visit Northeast Ohio — occasionally — but for those like ourselves who need to see artistically adventurous choreography and skilled performers on a regular basis, this may be the year to savor good, small ballet ensembles. Counting Joffrey Ballet at Blossom last August (with 40 dancers that's a big company), and Azure Barton and Artists last Saturday, DanceCleveland alone offers 4 companies with ballet chops this 2011 – 2012 season, reason enough for us to rejoice.

(Go to <http://InbalPinto.com> and see video of *Oyster*, DanceCleveland's next offering. Get tickets and see the whole season at <http://DanceCleveland.org/subscriptions>.)

Local companies have also stepped up to the plate. GroundWorks Dance Theatre continues to recruit and develop dancers with serious ballet skills. Last summer they pulled off a major programming coup, performing the world premiere of *Hindsight* by choreographer Lynn Taylor Corbett, fresh from her triumph reviving *Seven Deadly Sins* for New York City Ballet. (To see our interview with Taylor Corbett click [here](#). Keep up with GroundWorks at <http://NotSoObvious.com>.)

Also last summer, Verb ballets performed *Janis and Joe*, not our favorite rock ballet but a showcase for the ballet skills of the Verb dancers, including the women's corps dancing very well *en pointe*! (To see our interview with choreographer Christopher Fleming click [here](#). See what's next for Verb [here](#).)

Aszure Barton and Artists performed at the Ohio Theatre on Sat 10/29/11 presented by DanceCleveland and Playhouse Square.