

## New York dance company Aszure Barton & Artists makes dynamic Cleveland debut

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Too many choreographers treat dancers as if they're robots, devoid of life or expression. Not Aszure Barton, who creates works that celebrate human qualities that every performer wishes to share.

Those qualities overflowed in the two pieces that Aszure Barton & Artists presented Saturday at the Ohio Theatre under the auspices of DanceCleveland and PlayhouseSquare. In its Cleveland debut, the New York dance company reveled in its artistic director's compelling amalgam of physicality and expressive truth.



It isn't often that an ensemble of dancers is allowed to so openly enjoy what they're performing, but Barton appears to be drawing the best from her company by giving them material that communicates on many levels.

The Canadian choreographer does so to exuberant and sensuous effect in "Les Chambres de Jacques," Saturday's opening work, which begins with a male dancer in a long coat exploding in wild, quirky gyrations. He's soon joined by the eight other dancers onstage, dressed in a smorgasbord of contemporary and ballet costumes, who initiate a series of relationships.

The ensemble members engage in solos, duets and other combinations to music of Vivaldi, klezmer and Quebecois folk songs. Using a broad dance vocabulary, Barton keeps the action on fast forward, with the dancers occasionally laughing out loud, while also taking time to concentrate on intimate encounters performed to a sad ballad.

What makes "Les Chambres du Jacques" so enchanting and forceful is the outpouring of feeling Barton extracts from her dancers. There's plenty of whimsy to go around, including acrobatic hijinks, touching (and licking) of faces and a delirious hoedown. But Barton also emphasizes the torrid side of life and those moments when an ideal is unattainable.

The night's other work, "Busk," is another Barton brainstorm full of ingenious physicality and striking imagery. The title comes from the Spanish word "buscar," which translates to seek, and the episodes in this 45-minute narrative suggest the search for meaning, acceptance and fulfillment.

The denizens who take this journey include mimes, street performers, scantily clad maidens and an ensemble in black hoods that huddles together in mock reverence – with heads lit from above – or breaks apart to go thrusting in the air. It's a marvelously atmospheric and theatrical creation set to the gypsy-inflected music of Liova and the Kontraband and sacred choral works.

Typical for Barton, the material is endlessly inventive, intricate, robust and elastic. Dancers flail and soar, ride unicycles and juggle. A red-headed female bends herself in every direction. At the end, another female in white crawls offstage as a white feather drops slowly to the stage.

We may not always know exactly what Barton intends, but the freshness of her vision and polished gusto of her dancers keep our eyes glued to the stage and our minds poised to ponder her dynamic artistry.