

Dance review: Aszure Barton & Artists at Irvine Barclay Theatre

Southern California has been good to rising choreographic star Aszure Barton this year. In January the Bolshoi's Yekaterina Shipulina danced Barton's made-in-Moscow solo, "Dumka," in "Reflections" at Costa Mesa's Segerstrom Center for the Performing Arts. In February, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago performed her "Untouched" at the Irvine Barclay Theatre.

Thursday night, Barton clocked another Orange County outing, again at the Barclay, which this time hosted the Canadian-born choreographer's own group, Aszure Barton & Artists. On Saturday she participates in the opening season of the Valley Performing Arts Center in Northridge with "Busk" and "Blue Soup," both impressive in her troupe's area debut in Irvine.

The only inkling of the 35-year-old up-and-comer's serious ballet training (she's a product of Toronto's National Ballet School and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School) was her scissor-strength legs rooting her during her solo appearance that is part of "Blue Soup," a bundled pastiche of her past works. From this strong base, Barton stretched her torso, and stretched the lycra, too, of designer Fritz Masten's smart electric-blue pantsuit. Named for the color, the choreographer admitted in a private conversation that blue's her favorite.

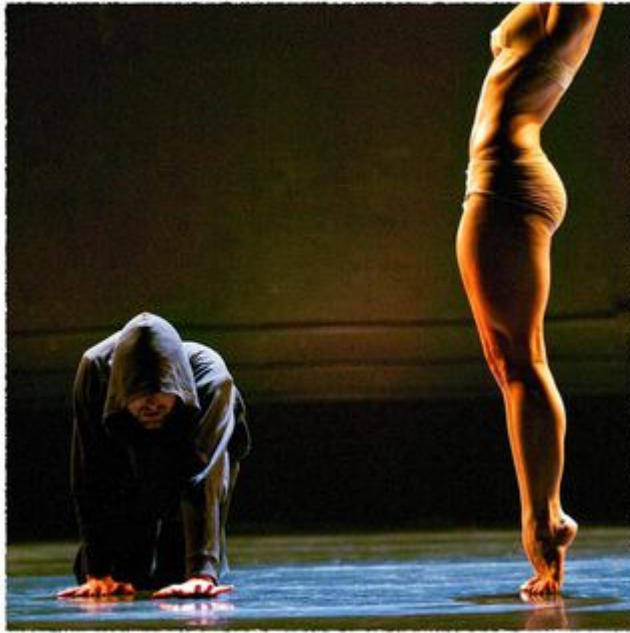


She also confessed her fondness for musical kitsch. "Blue Soup" bubbled merrily along to Serge Gainsbourg's kooky "Comic Strip," Kodo drumming and a ballad by Andy Williams, among others. But the costumes stole the show. First appearing formally, with blue shirts beneath their jackets, the nine body-beautiful dancers swiftly lost a layer, leaving the men bare-chested and the ladies in blue bras that matched their chic trousers.

"Blue Soup" opened with the wonderful dancer Jonathan Alsberry peeking through the Barclay's drawn red curtain, then bursting on stage, breaching the age-old demarcation between performer and audience. This great theme -- performance -- was also explored by Barton in a deep and thoughtful way in "Busk" (think: buskers, street artists), a work made last year during a Santa Barbara residency.

Set to Gypsy music, "Busk's" vivid episodes gently poked fun at the desire, indeed the

addiction, of the performer to please the audience. Sequences featured tricks, effects, magic, contortion and mugging.



Desperation showed up too in a repeating motif of a begging performer with subservient grin, hand outstretched and hat upturned for coins. It took further form in a crew of hooded weirdoes circulating the work's underbelly. Clad in shapeless, cruddy duds, they slunk near to the ground, tugging at the remaining dancers' feet and legs. Nicole Pearce's tiptop lighting dappled the scene with hazy smoke, heightening "Busk's" effects. A coda that featured dancers stripping to skivvies, however, undermined "Busk's" achievement; it felt unmotivated and it's a cliché.

Beyond her examination of stage and vaudeville, Barton's sincere and shapely

"Busk" may itself augur a return to a scrappy, survivalist, audience-pleasing mode for the performing arts. We can only watch, and hope.

-- Debra Levine