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By Gia Kourlas

Set to Live Gypsy Music, Otherworldly Vignettes of Characters Adrift



The Canadian choreographer Azure Barton gets around. She is the “Two and a Half Men” of the dance world, although some people might think that’s a good thing. For the past several years she has created works for established groups like American Ballet Theater and the Martha Graham Dance Company, as well as choreographed the Broadway production of “Threepenny Opera.” Last weekend at the Baryshnikov Arts Center — Mikhail Baryshnikov is also a longtime supporter of Ms. Barton — she unveiled “Busk,” an evening-length work for her own group, Azure Barton & Artists, that explores aspects of what it means to perform.

Set to live Gypsy music by Ljova and the Kontraband, along with recorded choral music, “Busk” refers to, according to the press notes, the Spanish word *buscar*, which means “to seek.” But the street performer sense of that title word probably wasn’t far behind; before the show began on Saturday afternoon, a man played harmonica in front of the theater.

Like much of Ms. Barton’s work, “Busk” is episodic in structure. At the start Eric Beauchesne, one of the nine dancers, rose from the first row and stood in front of a wall of black boas, designed by Jon Morris. As Mr. Beauchesne slipped through the feathers, the material instantly dropped to the floor.

Here, the lighting, by Nicole Pearce, created an otherworldly glow of silver and black. Within that landscape Mr. Beauchesne, wearing white gloves and moving jaggedly like a mime,

performed a solo that tapped into his rubbery quickness. But it didn't take long for his actions to reflect a predictable side of Ms. Barton's work: everyday gestures, slowed down or sped up; an undercurrent of passive vulnerability juxtaposed with a showy toughness; and the quick inhalation or exhalation of the breath.

In "Busk" solos were contrasted with robust, unison group dances, in which cast members, in layers of black by the costume designer Michelle Jank, pulled on hoods and nodded in time to the music. They could have been the bald revelers in George Balanchine's "Prodigal Son," stylish ninjas or homeless people.

Dancers took stabs at seducing the audience, either by rushing to the front of the stage to wave frantically in a pack, or in their solos. Cynthia Salgado, who peeled off layers to reveal a black halter, moved slowly while unfolding her arms and legs like taffy. (In a particularly trite moment, she created a circle in front of her body with her arms and stepped through it.)

Another dancer, Emily Oldak, stripped to a nude bra and shorts and performed a selection of balances, clearly borrowed from yoga class. And Jonathan Emanuell Alsberry, shirtless, mirrored a tapping sound heard in the score by shaking his hips and swiveling his feet.

But it was hard to see past the cast's obvious beauty; in her dreamlike setting Ms. Barton showed off her dancers, yet never revealed much about their interior lives. They perform — to the hilt — but they never really reach you.