

Barton and troupe enthrall in Hub debut

By Karen Campbell

Last night's Boston debut of Azure Barton & Artists, presented by the Celebrity Series, brilliantly showed just why the quirky Canadian is one of the hottest young choreographers today for concert, film, and Broadway. A protégé of Mikhail Baryshnikov with a Tony nomination for choreographing the 2006 revival of "The Threepenny Opera," she has created works for modern dance and ballet companies around the world.

The program featured two of Barton's most popular concert pieces, illustrating her penchant for lush, expansive physicality informed by expressive gestural nuance, vivid, playful theatricality, and a deep sense of humanity. Her superb dancers connect face to face, as well as body to body. They smile, laugh, yell, sing, plead for attention, and can throw off fouettés and grand jetés as easily as back flips. Balletic leaps and balances segue into grotesque contortions and lewd pelvic thrusts. An elegant penché collapses into a tumble down stairs.

Though the notes claim "BUSK" takes its name from the Spanish word *buscar* (to seek), it is a busker that Barton clearly evokes in her opening solo. In her dark suit, hoodie, and white gloves, she works the audience, waving, bowing, pointing to her upturned hat in between channeling elements from "Swan Lake," Charlie Chaplin, a street corner mime. It is a freewheeling dance that portrays the confidence, vulnerability, frustration, and need for approval that accompany the drive for artistic expression, and it sets the tone of this charming, poignant, and imaginative piece.

Set to a folk-tinged Slavic-sounding score primarily by Ljova and the Kontraband, "BUSK" takes on a kind of jovial European circus air when the full group amasses onstage. Communal vignettes are peppered with solos. Emily Oldak displays the lithe flexibility of a contortionist. Tobin Del Cuore juggles and rides a unicycle. At the end, Barton strips to her underwear, the artist literally laid bare.

As a collection of dance elements drawn from other pieces and set to a wild mix of music, "Blue Soup" is less cohesive contextually, but no less riveting as it spools through a series of solos and ensemble numbers. Standouts include a muscular, rubbery solo by Ben Wardell and the opening by the exquisite Andrew Murdock, whose body in his show-off solo seems to have a mind of its own, limbs flying, head swiveling, torso buckling as if sucker punched.