

## Aszure Barton and Her Troupe Sniff Out the Wild Essences of Life and Performance

By Deborah Jowitz



I'm not surprised that Canadian choreographer Aszure Barton's new work, *Busk*, scheduled for two performances at the Baryshnikov Arts Center's Jerome Robbins Theater, ended up being shown four times last weekend. Barton is a fascinating artist. If her 2009 *One in Three* for American Ballet Theatre seemed unfulfilled, it may be that she needs more time to gestate a piece than a busy ballet company can provide. She and her dancers nurtured *Busk* for over a year, and the

result grabs you by the throat. If, while waiting in the lobby before the performance, you watch footage of the piece filmed in a forest by Kevin Freeman, you can't wait for the doors to open. Who are these people in hoodies huddling in dry leaves between bare tree trunks? What clan? What troupe?

The theater presents you with another mystery. What can that dimly lit front curtain be made of? Mottled velvet? Hanging moss? Projected photos of the tribe (by Shannon DMOTE Peel) intermittently swim over its surface. Suddenly the house lights go out, and a man rises from the front row of the audience and walks through a hitherto unseen portal in the middle of the curtain/wall. Almost immediately, the whole thing falls in a pile at the audience's feet. It turns out to be made of gray, floor-to-ceiling feather boas (designer: Jon Morris), later used as nesting material to be dived into.

The word "busk" refers to the activities of street performers, although Barton, in interviews, has also aligned it with the Spanish verb *buscar*, meaning to seek or search for. References to buskers appear from time to time in the work. Eric Beauchesne's opening solo is a silky, athletic marvel, which an invisible, vaudevillian opponent (or Beauchesne's own hand) diverts without stopping the flow. He might want to talk to us, but is hit from behind. He handstands into a hat, and comes up with it on his head; seconds later, it's knocked off. In the end, he tosses it into the audience.

Often some or all of the eight performers don minstrelsy's white gloves. Jonathan Emanuell Alsberry strips off his loose-cut hoodie to perform bare-chested, and the percussion that accompanies his sinuous solo beneath a mirror ball suddenly sounds like the tap dance he isn't quite doing. Red-headed Emily Oldak—a Julliard graduate like five of the other performers in *Busk*—has also performed with Cirque du Soleil, and the solo that Barton has created for her makes sensuous use of her skills as a contortionist.

But these “performances” have a strange resonance, as do the unison or contrapuntal dances for groups or couples that surround and meld with them. The mostly Russian gypsy music intensifies this ambiance with its dark strands and wild gaiety. Some of it is performed live by Ljova + the Kontraband, with violist Lev Zhurbin occasionally wandering onto the stage, and Patrick Farrell (accordion), Mathias Kunzli (percussion), and Mike Savino (bass and banjo) half visible on side balconies above the stage. Inna Barmash rises unexpectedly from the front row into a beam of light to sing a song in Yiddish. Additional instruments and the voices of folk choruses swell from taped selections by other composers.

The movement is arresting. The dancers veer between tautness and a loose-bodied fluidity that's emphasized by Michelle Jank's floaty layers of jackets, dresses, and pants. When the performers' legs fly high, the move looks almost inadvertent, and often they work low to the ground—their feet spraddled, their knees bent, their hips swinging, their bodies whirled through the air like tumbleweeds. Sharp little gestures and switches of attention punctuate this—whether it's a dancer pointing a finger at us or three men sticking out their tongues as they go.

The slightly eerie ambiance is compounded by Barton's frequent emphasis on the group as spectators. Sometimes, hoodies on, they sit, stiff as dolls, on a small flight of steps that's part of the scenery and watch. During one part, Andrew Murdock looks on from a nest in the wooden beams to the audience's right. After Cynthia Salgado has stripped down to a halter top and skirt and performed a compelling solo, a hooded male dancer brings her white gloves, and they go along together—she walking, he crawling, then vice versa; Beauchesne then enters and applauds them. While Oldak, wearing almost nothing, does her number, the remaining seven performers lie prone on opposite sides of the square of light that skilled lighting designer Nicole Pearce has designated as Oldak's stage. For the performer's final foot-behind-the-neck trick, they swarm around her; but as soon as Zhurbin walks on, playing his viola so furiously that broken strings fly out from his bow, they leave her and flock to him.

The choreographer knows her performers well and presents them skillfully and lovingly to us: Stephan Laks, Evan Teitelbaum, Charlaïne Katsuyoshi, Jenna Fakhoury, in addition to those mentioned—all get to display their distinctive vividness onstage.

That Barton chose to end *Busk* with a brief reprise of the walking-the-dog motif seen earlier sums up her images of life as performance and both as a constant search for the ineffable. Laks crawls up to Salgado and embraces her from behind. The two of them are exiting as the lights fade—he crawls, she walks; perhaps, in the dark, she crawls, he walks. Sniffing out the future.