

weekend



Happy Dance

Inside the making of Cherice Barton's Aspen Santa Fe Ballet premiere

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Road to Joy

Cherice Barton's
'Eudaemonia' makes its
world premiere on Saturday



ROSALIE O'CONNOR/COURTESY PHOTO

Joseph Watson and Seia Rassenti in "Little mortal jump."

As she prepared her new piece for Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, choreographer Cherice Barton spent time privately with the company's dancers, discussing their life experiences and personal struggles, asking them to bring those — along with some still-kept secrets — to their performances.

At a rehearsal in mid-January at the company's Aspen studio, Barton's approach with her dancers veered closer to Stanislavski's method acting than the stan-

— standard step instruction of choreography.

Andrew Travers
The Aspen Times
"I had them doing a lot of soul-searching and reaching deep within themselves so they could bring their own stories into the work," said Barton, who did some introspection of her own for "Eudaemonia," which will premiere Saturday night at the Aspen District Theatre.

Her intimate technique elicited some real tears as well as genuine laughter during rehearsals. Barton is playing with creative fire.

Working on a duet between Aspen Santa Fe's Emily Proctor and Pete Leo Walker, Barton didn't make physical adjustments on the dancers. Instead, she focused on tweaking their motivations.

To Proctor, she explained: "The idea is that you're tired and you've tried everything and you've kind of lost hope. You've tried therapy, everything. ... So at the end of the duet you leave him and you know you don't need him."

The next time they ran through the pas de deux, Proctor wore a weary, teary-eyed anguish on her face and imbued her movement with emotional defeat — collapsing from side to side as Walker caught her body and pushed her upright.

Barton, still relatively early in the rehearsal process, then tried to pull her dancer back from the emotional edge.

"You're definitely going to end up in the crazy zone if you go that deep everyday," she said with a laugh.

COME ON, GET HAPPY

The new work — the Los Angeles-based choreographer's first for Aspen Santa Fe Ballet and her solo debut as a contemporary dance choreographer — is about the universal quest for fulfillment ("eudaemonia" translates from Greek, roughly, as "happiness").

"It's really taking a 360-degree view of happiness and our search for it as human beings," she explained. "Within that, there's infinite layers. There's self-worth, self-love, forgiveness, perfectionism, addiction ..."

Barton has a distinguished career in commercial choreography, putting together Cirque spectacles in Las Vegas, "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark" on Broadway, "America's Got Talent" for television and Katy Perry's 2016 Grammys performance. She brought a more narrative-minded, less abstract approach to Aspen than most of the company's guest choreographers.

"The commercial world has given me the chops to be able to take more risk, to be able to understand the importance of reaching an audience that, perhaps, wouldn't have had an interest or necessarily been exposed to dance," she said.

In another showbiz-meets-ballet touch,



JESSICA MOORE/COURTESY PHOTO

Cherice Barton, left, in rehearsals last month for "Eudaemonia," which has its world premiere Saturday night at the Aspen District Theatre.



ROSALIE O'CONNOR/COURTESY PHOTO

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's Craig Black and Anna Gerberich in Jiri Kylian's "Sleepless."

the costumes for Barton's piece have been designed by Daniela Gschwendtner, best known for her wardrobe work on "Dancing with the Stars."

A Juilliard-trained dancer, Barton spent 15 years in internationally touring companies and remains connected to the life and challenges of a professional — she began her mornings in Aspen by sweating alongside the company dancers in daily barre class.

"Eudaemonia" brings to the stage some archetypal settings on the search for happiness (or the escape from unhappiness). One section is set in a 12-step meeting — the cast gathered in a circle on folding

chairs before breaking out in dance. It's set to a sound collage that mixes samples of Nina Simone's "Feeling Good" with snippets of people — Barton and her family and friends, it turns out — saying things like "Be happy," "Stop beating yourself up" and "Count your blessings." Another is set in a psychiatrist's office. In rehearsal, it featured Craig Black as a doctor and Sadie Brown as his patient on the couch dancing a back-and-forth bouncing between happy and sad, manic and depressive as Elvis Presley's melancholy cover of "Blue Moon" plays.

Walker, with his charisma level turned up to 11 and his head bobbing comically, then pops up from behind the psychiatrist's couch. His recurring character comes in and out of the piece in varied guises — moving with a Rat Pak aloof swagger here, a boisterous skip there, with a seductive moonwalk and break dance in between.

"He's the idea of happiness. He's who and what we search for," Barton explained of Walker's character.

The theatricality and the narrative possibilities of the piece led Barton to create a lot more than she could fit into the short-form ballet ("I need to do a sequel," she said). One section, which Barton later cut, chronicled a drugs-and-decadence path to happiness and seemed sure to be a crowd-pleasing bit. It called on a group of dancers to mimic smoking, snorting, selfie-taking and pill-popping in an exuberant section set to

If You Go ...

What: Aspen Santa Fe Ballet performing Cherice Barton's "Eudaemonia," Alejandro Cerrudo's "Little mortal jump" and Jiri Kylian's "Sleepless"

Where: Aspen District Theatre

When: Saturday, 7:30 p.m.

How much: \$25 to \$94

Tickets: Wheeler Opera House box office; www.aspenshowtix.com

BALLET

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the Muppets' "Mahna Mahna."

While the Muppets didn't make the final cut, the soundscape of "Eudaemonia" does include some serious cuteness in original pieces mixed by Barton's husband, sound designer Jeremy Jurin. It incorporates the voices of their daughters — age 2 and 4 — at various points. A section of the ballet about motherhood features four female dancers moving languidly to the sounds of babies laughing.

"A lot of my work comes from within," Barton said. "Since I've become a mom, it's forced me to look at myself and take the proper steps to be the best person I can be — and that's fricking hard, because no one really wants to look at patterns and things: we want to have an instant fix. That's the heart of this piece."

OFF TO LA LA LAND

Barton first dipped her toe into contemporary ballet choreography in 2012, when she collaborated with Donald Sales on a full evening ballet for the Chutzpah Festival in Vancouver that riffed on Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns.

"It was risky, because something like that could be a huge flop," she said. "But we felt really confident about it."

The piece went over well, and word of it got to Aspen Santa Fe directors Jean-Philippe Malaty and Tom Mossbrucker. The pair were on the hunt for a Los Angeles-based choreographer for a co-commission with the Valley Performing Arts Center in Los Angeles, where Aspen Santa Fe is in its second year of a three-year residency.

"L.A. is really the center of commercial dance — between TV, movies, backup dancers — so we thought, 'Let's look for



ROSALIE O'CONNOR/COURTESY PHOTO

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet will perform Alejandro Cerrudo's "Little mortal jump" in its program Saturday.

someone who has that background, make them cross over, and see what happens," Malaty recalled. "That's what brought us to Cherice."

Valley Performing Arts Center director Thor Steingraber added: "They really combed the countryside for who would be the right person for their company, who would also be the right person for us."

After meeting Barton in Los Angeles in fall 2015, Malaty and Mossbrucker brought her to Aspen for an informal workshop with the company last March.

"It was like love at first sight," Barton recalled of that initial collaboration. "What excited me was the environment that Tom and J.P. have created — it's supportive, it's warm, everyone is so kind. The dancers

are not only phenomenally trained but they're open-minded. They're willing to try anything."

That first workshop consisted mostly of messing around with movement and ideas. But, at one point, Barton began maneuvering the dancers through Jimmy Durante's bittersweet recording of "Smile," which struck a chord and became the inspiration for "Eudaemonia."

This weekend's premiere of Barton's new work will be complemented in the program by performances of Alejandro Cerrudo's "Little mortal jump" and Jiri Kylian's "Sleepless." Both ballets were well-received in their company premieres in Aspen last summer. After performing the three-ballet program in Aspen on Saturday, and playing

three additional Colorado dates, the company brings it to the Valley Performing Arts Center on March 3.

Aspen Santa Fe is the first resident company at the Valley Performing Arts Center. Steingraber and the company found each other as Aspen Santa Fe was looking of an entrée into Los Angeles and as Steingraber — who took over the theater in 2014 — was in the market for a contemporary company to enliven the Los Angeles dance scene.

"One of my first goals was to get this in place," Steingraber said.

He noted that, in Hollywood's golden age, film studios all had their own dance studios staffed with full-time ballet dancers hopping from movie to movie. That evolved into today's commercial dance industry in the show business capital.

"It's this long arc of what dance in L.A. is," he said, "but, weirdly, L.A. has never had a prolonged and major presence of a company."

Steingraber saw the immaculate style of Aspen Santa Fe's 11 dancers, and the progressive bleeding-edge taste of Malaty and Mossbrucker as ideal fits for his theater. He said he hopes to foster an intimate audience-dancer relationship in Los Angeles like the one the company has developed in Aspen and Santa Fe over the past two decades.

"That's something that's missing in L.A.," he said. "I knew that I wanted a company that had a foot firmly in ballet but also had a foot firmly in innovation."

In Barton's new work, he saw an impeccable artistry that doesn't sacrifice or ignore vaunted Los Angeles values like entertainment and narrative: "She is a quintessential thinker, in the way that artists in L.A. think."

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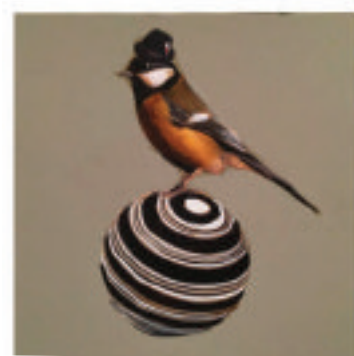
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