

HAPPY FEET

CHOREOGRAPHER
CHERICE BARTON



ASPEN SANTA FE BALLET



Michael Wade Simpson | For The New Mexican

Choreographer Cherice Barton, whose piece *Eudaemonia*, co-commissioned by Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, plays at the Lensic Performing Arts Center on Saturday, April 8, has had an unusual journey in dance. Along with her sisters Charissa and Aszure, who also became professional dancers, she started normally enough — studying tap, jazz, and ballet at a local dance school near her home in Edmonton, Canada. She moved into the preprofessional training course at the School of Alberta Ballet at fourteen, and joined the affiliated company Alberta Ballet at seventeen. After five years of performing classical ballet, she became a member of Ballets Jazz de Montréal — an ensemble not unlike Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, Barton said — a touring group with a relatively small number

of dancers, performing contemporary ballets often created for the company. It was on a “girls’ holiday” in Las Vegas, however, that things began to veer off a predictable course: That weekend she first saw a Cirque du Soleil show. “Curiosity and ambition lead me elsewhere,” Barton said. “Cirque du Soleil’s show *O* blew my mind. Here was a \$200 million theater built around a vision of water, acrobatics, and entertainment. I knew I wanted to be a part of that world.” Barton had contacts at Cirque headquarters back in Montreal. Eventually she found herself working with Franco Dragone, one of Cirque’s most influential directors, who was embarking on an independent project called *Le Rêve* — *The Dream*, at the Wynn hotel in Las Vegas.

“There was a steep learning curve,” Barton said, describing her job as resident choreographer. “I had

been dancing and teaching and assisting choreographers at BJM. The next thing I knew, I was thrown into a \$150 million production with 80 artists.” Like *O*, which Dragone also directed, *Le Rêve* is a water-based spectacle combining elements of circus, theater, and dance. “Everybody had to dance, fly, and get wet,” she said. The movement and dances she created included ballroom, contemporary dance, and acrobatics. “Everyone had to get their scuba certification. The men would flip and land in the water and never resurface. The theater had underwater wings, and scuba divers would lead the dancers offstage sharing air from their tanks.”

Barton’s dance career continued in a commercial vein. She was on the creative team for the TV show *America’s Got Talent*, she choreographed Katy Perry’s 2015 appearance at the Grammy Awards, and

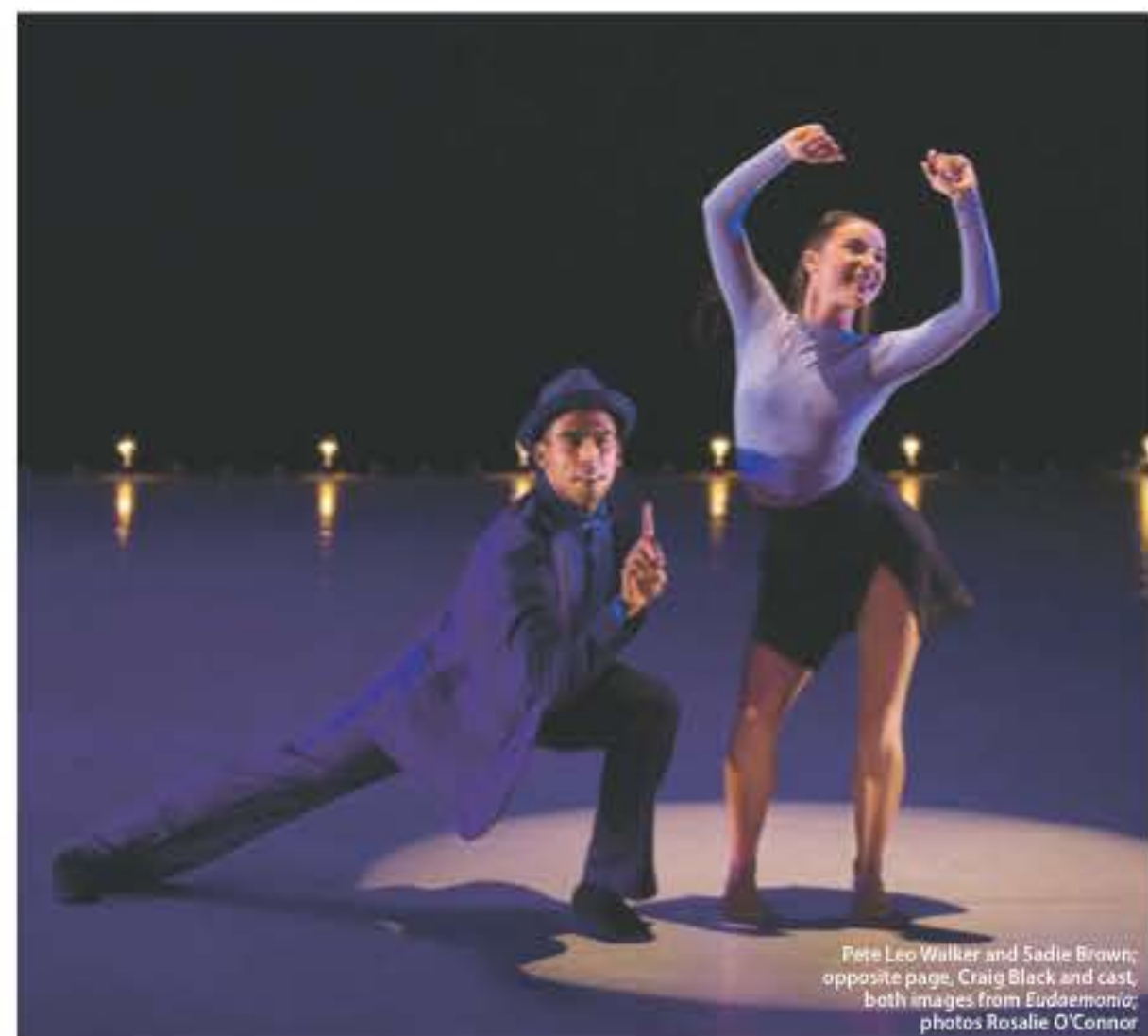
she signed on to work with *The Lion King* director Julie Taymor on the epic, expensive, and special-effects-laden Broadway show *Spiderman: Turn Off the Dark*.

An unplanned yearlong hiatus during the development of *Spiderman* and the subsequent replacement of Taymor’s entire creative team offered Barton the unexpected time to explore her own voice as a contemporary ballet choreographer. She began to experiment on some talented students she found at the Broadway Dance Center, where she was teaching. “I called the dancers ‘Team Barton.’ They had a mix of classical and contemporary training like me, and they were also curious about theatricality.” She was also hired to create ballets for dancers at The Juilliard School and other college programs.

A ballet she created in 2012 based on Sergio Leone’s spaghetti Westerns first brought her to the attention of the directors of Aspen Santa Fe Ballet. “I had not been pursuing work as a ballet choreographer. My sister Aszure was creating ballets all over the world, and my best friend is the choreographer Crystal Pite. I had decided it was not my thing. Then, out of the blue, I got a call from Aspen.” She checked out the company online and asked around about its reputation. Over a three-hour lunch in Los Angeles, ASFB directors Jean-Philippe Malaty and Tom Mossbrucker sealed a deal with her. “I basically fell in love with both of them. They are cool and open-minded. They wanted me to be me.”



Cherice Barton; photo George Lange



Pete Leo Walker and Sadie Brown; opposite page, Craig Black and cast, both images from *Eudaemonia*; photos Rosalie O’Connor

“Me” is very much what *Eudaemonia* — a Greek word often translated as “happiness” — is about. “It’s a 100-percent heart project. I decided I was going to pull from my own life and be as vulnerable and genuine as I can.” Barton is forty-six and lives in Los Angeles with her husband, who works in film and TV, and two daughters, now three and four. “I’ve always been one of those people who needs the manic energy of performing in a show or going to parties to give me a feeling that I call happiness,” she said. “One night, I was lying in bed with my two daughters. Bedtime can be an ordeal, but as I lay there with one girl on each arm, watching them fall asleep, I realized this is happiness. It’s not manic. It’s contentment. That’s my truth.”

In the piece, nine dancers represent different aspects of Barton’s feelings, struggles, and experiences. “I had interviews with the dancers and went deep with them,” she said. “I would offer a sentence, a word, or a feeling and ask them to physicalize it.” Some of the cues included “ego,” “yearning for family,” “addiction,” and “perfectionism.” Barton added, “I’m obsessed with story and acting. This ballet could have been two hours long.”

Pete Leo Walker’s character has Gene Kelly, Bob Fosse, and Michael Jackson moving inside him, Barton said. “It was my way of acknowledging the greatness of those physical actors. Pete represents an idea of fleeting happiness, the charming guy who ultimately realizes he’s got to find it in himself. Emily [Proctor] represents my story, my journey. Stepping into her truth. Craig [Black] dances looking into a

mirror, always struggling with perfectionism. The more messy he gets, the more he begins to unravel, the more he is able to find a sense of happiness.”

The score for *Eudaemonia* is a collage of music and voices. Jimmy Durante sings “Make Someone Happy” and “Smile When Your Heart is Breaking.” There is music by David Darling, Nick Cave, and Warren Ellis. The laughter of her daughters and the voices of her parents and friends can be heard throughout. “There have always been voices in my head,” she said. “I wasn’t happy. There was a lot of self-talk. I wrote these down while I was making the piece and asked others to record them.” “Be happy. Keep your chin up. Enjoy this time — it goes by so fast. Stop beating yourself up. Smile.”

Barton said her dance rides a tricky edge when it comes to sentimentality. And for dancers, who are not generally trained in acting, showing any kind of emotion becomes even more fraught with risk. “It’s hard for dancers to use their faces. I told them it was like method acting, that they had to access something so that there were genuine feelings, so that a smile would come out right.” ◀

details

- ▶ Aspen Santa Fe Ballet performs pieces by Cherice Barton, Alejandro Cernudo, and Jiri Kylian
- ▶ 7:30 p.m. Saturday, April 8
- ▶ Lensic Performing Arts Center, 211 W. San Francisco St.
- ▶ \$36-59 • 505-988-1234 • www.ticketssantafe.org