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DANCE / REVIEWS

## Dance Review: Anna Barker Burns Toxic Masculinity and Self-Doubt as Fuel for a Work Full of Humor and Beauty

Posted by **Chris Vitiello** on Thu, Jun 14, 2018 at 10:12 AM

**real.live.people: *Again, but this time with feeling***

★★★★

Thursday, Jun. 7–Sunday, Jun. 10  
Living Arts Collective, Durham

One way to respond to oppression is to make fists and fight back. That kind of conflict draws attention to a revolutionary cause, but one risks everything in the fight—not just losing it, but also losing oneself in it.



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photo by Luke Barker

**real.live.people: *Again, but this time with feeling***

In *Again, but this time with feeling*, Durham-based dancer and choreographer **Anna Barker's** new evening-length work with her company, real.live.people, and other local artists, the fists are unclenched. Instead, hands proffer vulnerability and reflection in a work about preserving one's being amid struggle, which turns out to be a victory.

The piece premiered at the Living Arts Collective last week, part of the **DIDA season**. On its surface, it's about how women endure and absorb degrees of toxic masculinity ranging from microaggressions tucked in turns of phrase to outright verbal and physical abuse. But Barker's real accomplishment is in expressing that subtle dynamic between endurance and absorption while also exploring how one might use it in a creative process.

With thirteen vignettes that alternate between group and solo dance sequences, short films, and theatrical scenes combining movement and video, *Again* has a lot of content, literal, metaphorical, and abstract. In three films by videographer

Emily Frachtling, Barker and dancer Christopher Grohs go on increasingly unpleasant dates during which Grohs escalates mansplaining toward outright abuse. And in two Skyped job interviews, actor Patience dehumanizes dancer Stephanie Blackmon Woodbeck through sheer rudeness and indifference. At once infuriating and hilarious, these stories entertain while establishing the core conflict that the more analytical dance sections address.

It's difficult to make masculine microaggressions funny in the #MeToo era, but Barker pulls it off without compromising the message. These aren't cheap jokes; they are expensive jokes that she and the other dancers have paid for daily for a long time. Barker finds a degree of empowerment in a clear-eyed retelling of male douchebaggery, and a further degree in showing the insidious domino effect as that treatment echoes in her own thinking.

Indeed, Barker emerges as a full-fledged humorist. In **previous collaborations with Leah Wilks**, her comedic tendency has been apparent as a kind of sustained facetiousness. But this work, her first since Wilks moved away, takes it further, with razor-sharp writing in "at your service," a dance section with a riotous voiceover of women torturing a waitress. Barker also shows more subtlety in her acting in the video sections than she ever has before. What was once self-deprecating or teasing, like the jokes dancers crack at the bar after rehearsal, now cuts with a critical edge.

Barker's interiority comes out in the dance sections that punctuate the wealth of media in *Again*. Assaulted by male voices, she puts self-doubt and vacillating confidence on stage, anchoring it in two solos that ostensibly frame the entire work. In the first, "what about this' and other false starts," she opens with a plaintive, desperate reach toward the audience. After a few starts and stops, a voiceover begins an internal monologue in which Barker questions whether the work has content or is even worthwhile. Her movement fails to overcome her self-interruptions. She closes the solo with the opening pose, now reaching toward the backdrop.

The piece also ends powerfully, with a double duet by Woodbeck, Linda Phung, Allie Pfeffer, and Alyssa Noble before Barker's second solo. The pairs establish a gestural sequence during which they test and support each other. As the sequence repeats and accelerates, the same movements lose their sincere communication, becoming competitive, even combative. It's wonderfully danced, and it's chilling.

Reaching breathless points of exhaustion, the other dancers leave one by one. After a final laugh at Grohs's expense, Barker enters and begins her solo where the last one left off. Her dancing, while urgent, is smoother and more lyrical now. Neither anxious nor restless, she moves unrestrainedly around the entire stage, performing floor work and jumps. But this breaks down into a contemplative sequence on the floor that seems at the mercy of gravity itself. Failing to shake it off, Barker stops the music, asks for the lights to be brought up, and calls her company onstage. She tells them she has doubts about the solo and asks for critical feedback, and they keep talking as the lights dwindle to darkness.

If Barker is making an overall statement about where she is as a person and as a dance maker, it might be that the only way to move forward is to use everything, regardless of whether those ideas, feelings, and movements are conventionally thought of as positive or negative. This allows self-doubt to be claimed as a creative process that, if fully owned and expressed, offers insights into how the art the process creates marks growth for the makers of the work. It's a kind of beauty in sincerity that can withstand a whole parade of douchebags.

Tags: Dance review, Anna Barker, real.live.people., Again but this time with feeling, DIDA, Living Arts Collective, Image

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