

DANCE » REVIEW



Azure Barton performed *Jack in a Box* for the first time at the Ottawa festival.

A journey through life in dance

CANADA DANCE FESTIVAL OPENING WEEKEND

At various theatres in Ottawa
on Saturday and Sunday

BY PAULA CITRON

By a happy coincidence, the opening weekend of the biennial Canada Dance Festival presented three of the country's top female choreographers and two of its foremost female dancers. When works by New York-based Azsure Barton, Vancouver's Crystal Pite and Calgary's Denise Clarke are performed by the likes of Montreal's Louise Lecavalier and Toronto's Peggy Baker, that is an embarrassment of riches.

Barton, Pite and Clarke all create scintillating dances that please both the eye and the mind. Barton's inventive physicality is delightfully quirky,

challenging and unpredictable. Pite translates the heart and soul that drive the human engine into the kinetic body, while Clarke's droll fusion of the spoken word and movement is always an incisive comment on the zeitgeist of the times.

The excellent Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal [bjm_danse] presented *An Evening with Azsure Barton*, which included the world premiere of *Jack in a Box* along with a remount of *Les Chambres des Jacques* (2006). The two works go well together because the former looks at individuality while the latter focuses on group mentality.

Jack in a Box can be viewed as a journey through life set against music that runs from Gregorian chants to the Kodo Drummers. The dancers begin as frolicsome schoolchildren

and end up at a synchronized movement board meeting. On the way, hormones rage, loves are lost and won and followers are overpowered by leaders. Anne-Marie Veevaete's clever costumes also mark the passage of time.

The dancers increasingly lose their individuality as they are swept up by the power of the group. In creating the sound design, Barton and Ian Robinson had percussive rhythm play an important role. By the end of the piece, the intense beat propels the movement where it becomes almost impossible to escape from being part of the herd.

In a physical sense, Barton puts every muscle into play and her choreography is exuberant, even when serious matters are being portrayed. Barton is sexy, cheeky and pro-

found all at the same time.

Since leaving Edouard Lock's *La La La Human Steps*, Lecavalier has branched out as an independent artist and one imagines choreographers lining up to create dances for her remarkable performance skills. In short, when it comes to physicality, Lecavalier can do anything, be it fast or slow.

Lecavalier's program, that premiered in 2006, included intriguing works by Benoît Lachambre and Tedd Robinson, but Pite's *Lone Epic* was the standout.

Pite is not afraid of using props and sets. *Lone Epic* contains a plethora of music stands, and when the scores on each are turned over, they spell out "What is she really thinking?" and "What do you really want, really, really, really?"

The music stands are facing

the audience, and Lecavalier begins with her back to us. She is the conductor, and as a melo-dramatic aria from French opera swells from the unseen orchestra, she absorbs the emotional crescendo into her own body with dramatic flourish. By the time the first part is over, Lecavalier has shed her formal suit and glasses, and has knocked over all the music stands except for the ones marked "you" and "want." At key moments in the piece, "you" is highlighted.

Pite knows how to develop an idea, from the commanding gestures of an orchestra conductor, to a complete physical breakdown manifested in tiny, shuffling movement that is fragmented and disordered. The end is heart-rending. Amid the detritus of her crumpled orchestra, Lecavalier waves a

gentle goodbye at the same time as she reaches out to whatever it is that she really wants.

Clarke has given Baker and New York dancer Larry Hahn a duet to remember in *Radio Play*. It is a Baker we have never seen before, clad in long black boots and a working woman's corporate suit. The crux of the matter, as she tells us, is that she is 50, her dance career is coming to an end, and she needs to find a real job. Hahn is the interviewer.

The dialogue voice-overs and live conversation between the two are interpolated by Baker's wry asides on the developing situation. While the work is hilarious, it is, as always in Clarke's case, serious as well.

The movement does not mirror exactly what is being said. Clarke uses movement for subtext, or emotional pulse, or foreshadowing. She has also included a slide-splitting solo for Baker as she demonstrates to Hahn exactly what modern dance is, this being her only skill.

It is always amazing just how the clever Clarke seamlessly links physicality with thought. The movement never jars, but is in a constant flux. A hand gesture here, a turn there, just simple, pedestrian physical things we do every day, yet, taken together, they speak volumes about ourselves and our relationships.

The weekend also included Vancouver's Kenneth Emig performing his site-specific *Diffract* on the National Arts Centre's upper terrace and Montreal's Zab Maboungou's solo *Décompte*.

Emig's installation made good use of the building's stone surfaces to show a soul in crisis by climbing up walls and putting himself in danger of falling. Maboungou used musicians playing the cello and African drums to demonstrate the conflict of her two worlds. While certainly worthy, her African-influenced movement took on a sameness over time. » The Canada Dance Festival continues in Ottawa until June 15.