

DANCE REVIEW

LaTasha Barnes's 'The Jazz Continuum' can't stop moving

By **Jeffrey Gantz** Globe correspondent, Updated January 20, 2023, 4:32 p.m.



LaTasha Barnes (center) and members of her dance company during a performance of "The Jazz Continuum." ROBERT TORRES

Before house and hip-hop, before jerking and twerking, popping and locking, waacking and voguing, before the Twist and the Stroll, there was the Lindy Hop. Although this swing dance got its name from Charles Lindbergh and his 1927 solo trans-Atlantic flight from New York to Paris, it was born in Harlem in 1928, with roots in previous Black

inventions like the Texas Tommy and the Charleston. Described as a set of “Explorations,” LaTasha Barnes’s “The Jazz Continuum” draws a direct line from the Swing Era to the present day. As presented Thursday by the Celebrity Series at the New England Conservatory’s Plimpton Shattuck Black Box Theatre, Barnes’s 60-minute piece makes its point in the most rewarding possible way.

Barnes herself started out in house and hip-hop before becoming a champion Lindy Hopper. In 2021 she received a Bessie Award as an outstanding performer for her sustained achievement in dance, and that same year she was named a “breakout star” by The New York Times. Commissioned by the Guggenheim Museum’s Works & Process performing-arts series, “The Jazz Continuum” debuted at the Guggenheim in May 2021 and was presented outdoors at Jacob’s Pillow in August 2021. For this Boston engagement, Barnes has expanded on those first two iterations, her explorers now numbering 11 dancers and six musicians, in a program that, in theory, moves from “The Call” to “The Embodiment,” “The Response,” “The Exchange,” “The Vibe,” and finally “Our Acknowledgement.”

In practice, it’s an hour of non-stop dancing. DJ/turntablist Diyanne Monet is out there a good half-hour before curtain, as if she can’t wait to get started. The musicians enter first, saxophonist and musical director Christopher McBride not shy about asking for applause. MC Melanie George introduces the performers; she tells us that “The Jazz Continuum” is about “the past, present, and future of Black vernacular dance,” calls out past heroes like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Frankie Manning, and Norma Miller, and promises visits to Haiti and Cuba as well as Harlem.

Harlem is up first: Vocalist Imani Rousselle powers through Chris Turner & Uptown Swing’s “Harlem, Harlem, Harlem,” and we hear Bill Withers’s “Summer Night in Harlem.” The subdued lighting from Serena Wong creates a club atmosphere, and the band establishes a musical continuum, jazz past, present, and future all rolled into one.

The dancers, women in colorful jumpsuits and men in casual shirts and pants, also dissolve time zones. Early on they do a Stroll where each dancer goes down the line in a solo: Barnes swivels, Reyna Núñez shimmies, Ray F. Davis plays with weight, Alain “Hurrikane” Lauture hints at breaking, Shana Maria Weaver swirls, Michele Byrd-McPhee goes from a Charleston into a split, Tyedric Hill Lindy Taps. They form a hand-clapping circle to McBride’s sax and drummer Marcus E’Shadd Parker’s backbeat, moving in unison, in imitation, in bouts of outdoing one another.



LaTasha Barnes and saxophonist and Music Director Christopher McBride in "The Jazz Continuum." ROBERT TORRES

Now and then they pair off and Lindy Hop, looking loose and comfortable; there's nothing showy in the athletic vein of Manning and Miller, though at one point Imani Arrington does go airborne. The b-boy action, largely from Lauture and Le'Andre Douglas, isn't extravagant either. A casual, informal party vibe prevails, everyone applauding even the briefest solo turns. McBride comes center stage and blows the dancers off their feet. His kinetic jazz rhythms ground the evening, but when Arrington

and Duane Lee Holland Jr. get down and dirty on the floor, he accompanies with a seductive version of the Juan Tizol/Duke Ellington “Caravan,” and eventually, he puts down his sax and Lindy Hops with Barnes.

A guys-only segment features split jumps and barrel turns and a line-dance Charleston; the women’s response leads into a Latin Lindy sequence, and then Barnes has a solo where, in the spirit of the evening, house and Lindy merge. Toward the end Boston native Jennifer “Lady Beast” Viaud comes on for some popping and locking, and Monet leaves the turntable for a spin on the dance floor. Barnes leads the dancers in a sashay through the audience before they line up downstage for mini individual curtain calls. That should be the end, but it’s a while still before Barnes can bring herself to lead them offstage, and even then the band plays on. There’s just no stopping this “Continuum.”

THE JAZZ CONTINUUM

Choreography by LaTasha Barnes. Presented by the Celebrity Series of Boston. At New England Conservatory’s Plimpton Shattuck Black Box Theatre, Thursday (repeats Friday and Saturday). Tickets \$75. 617-482-2595, www.celebrityseries.org

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