

DANCE REVIEW

LaTasha Barnes: a joyful force of nature at Jacob's Pillow

By **Janine Parker** Globe correspondent, Updated August 12, 2021, 12:53 p.m.



Tyedric Hill, Duane Lee Holland Jr., Alaine Lauture, LaTasha Barnes, Ray F. Davis, Shana Maria Weaver, and Reyna Núñez in LaTasha Barnes presents "The Jazz Continuum" at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival. In the back are musicians Jon Thomas and Ulysses Owens Jr. CHERYLYNN TSUSHIMA

BECKET — Perhaps Mother Nature is just trying to keep up with LaTasha Barnes. Even the extreme heat that's settled over the Berkshires for several days, however, isn't as hot as Barnes and the team of dancers and musicians who've joined her in her show "The Jazz Continuum" at Jacob's Pillow this week.

While Jazz dance is often proudly proclaimed to be a uniquely American art form, its origins belong to the African-Americans whose forebears were

abducted from their homeland and forced into enslavement here. Over time the great tree of Jazz dance has grown several branches, each bearing imprints of those roots while sending out new stylistic shoots. Social dances such as the Lindy Hop and the Charleston are older cousins to street dances such as breaking and jookin. Tap; Waacking; Hip-Hop; Broadway-style: it's a big tree.

Barnes is, among many, many other things, a dance educator, but while the dancers individually specialize in a variety of those branches, this show isn't meant to be a primer on Jazz dance. Nor is it, as associate Pillow curator Melanie George (she's also the dramaturg of "The Jazz Continuum") makes clear in her introduction, a show that's being "adapted" for this stage. Rather, we are being invited into an experience. Understood. As it happens, it's a generous, joyful elixir of an experience.

Six dancers and four musicians join Barnes for the approximately 45-minute series of "Explorations," some of it choreographed by Barnes and Mickey Davidson, and some recreations of historical Jazz and Lindy Hop choreography by current practitioners Bobby White and Chester Whitmore as well as some of the great elders who've passed: Marie Bryant, Frankie Manning, Norma Miller, and Harold Nicholas. In her introduction, George "calls them into the space" by saying their names (and others'); here are the names of this fabulous younger generation joining Barnes: dancers Ray F. Davis, Tyedric Hill, Duane Lee Holland Jr., Alaine Lauture, Reyna Núñez, and Shana Maria Weaver and musicians Britney Brown (DJ), Christopher McBride (saxophonist), Ulysses Owens Jr. (drummer), and the show's musical director, pianist Jon Thomas.

"Continuum" is expertly choreographed — the details of the movements and the architecture of the staging clearly drawn — but there is yet an easy-going feeling of improvisation that could slyly belie the work's formidable structure and the performers' intense work. It's at once tightly woven and loosely cozy.

The dancers, clad in bright dance sneakers, often form a circle with individuals taking a quick solo turn in its center. It's like a breakdancing cypher, this motif, but here those still on the circle's perimeter also dance, continuously, so that the shape itself seems to be a living entity, pulsing, breathing, throbbing. Whether in those circles, or in lines, or in the occasional solo or duet, several of the styles mentioned above are casually layered, so that the swing of Lindy Hop is followed by a little soft shoe shuffling, a classic, lilting grapevine morphs into a staccato toprock.

A few high-flying side-split leaps from Holland aside, the dancers' movements are deeply grounded, their knees constantly gooey, even when, say, Barnes's arms become like two snakes weaving above her head, or when Núñez shimmy-plunges in a plush arch back. Weaver's extended solo is a study of swirls, as she chaînés on her feet or on her knees; as Davis pops his shoulders, the movement rippling through his arms, his face suggests (comically) that his limbs have a life of their own. Hill maneuvers his long body with a sensual sureness, then with a winning smile, seems to become a self-conscious teenager, bounding off playfully. Lauture, seemingly out of nowhere, catapults sideways or forward onto one or two hands, the rest of his body hovering upside down before rolling bonelessly back down to earth.

Although the score does include some fabulous pre-recorded tracks, the real treat is the live musicians, playing — in both senses of the word — with the dancers. Thomas “calls” Barnes, with evocative yet spare notes emanating from his keyboard; the other musicians' instruments likewise call the other dancers in. Before you know it, the stage is on fire, packed as it is with stellar soloists. Yet in the end “The Jazz Continuum” is a family affair, with Barnes the matriarch/force of nature at its center.

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