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## DANCE / REVIEWS

# Dance review: Did the first show from Durham Independent Dance Artists fulfill its promise?

Posted by **Brian Howe** on Mon, Nov 17, 2014 at 12:15 PM

**real.live.people.durham**

*it's not me it's you*

Motorco Music Hall, Nov. 8–9

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**Durham Independent Dance Artists** is a new organization designed to consolidate the energies and the audiences of local indie dancemakers, who have been an increasingly strong presence in Triangle nightclubs as of late. Its first season, comprising nine performances, kicked off the weekend before last with **real.live.people.durham's** **Kickstarter-funded** *it's not me it's you* at Motorco.



photo: Luke Barker

A duet between **company founder Anna** Anna Barker and Leah Wilks

**Barker** and the ubiquitous **Leah Wilks**, the deceptively anarchic but carefully scripted program of linked vignettes set a high standard of quality and vibrancy for the remainder of the season, which continues with **shows by Justin Tornow's COMPANY and Tommy Noonan at the Carrack in December**. And the plan to consolidate audiences appears to be working (though the personal popularity of Barker and Wilks was surely a factor): On Sunday night, spectators spilled out of the Motorco bleachers, with many sitting cross-legged on the ground.

The performance ranged from Motorco's stage to its floor, beginning on the former with a set-up evocative of a TV dating game show. As Barker and Wilks sat on stools mugging like *The Price is Right* spokesmodels, showcasing themselves, an announcer's voiceover described each of them, with Wilks emerging as a stereotypical perfect mate who likes long walks on the beach, Barker as an emotionally distant—and more realistic—foil. This was the first inkling of a dichotomy that would become the show's most powerful current.

Such crowd-pleasing set pieces recurred throughout, frequently drawing big laughs. A live version of **Phil Collins' epic ballad "Against All Odds,"** with Barker and Wilks on competent keyboard and vocals, respectively, morphed into a chest-beating lip synch of the original track. At the halfway mark, Barker feigned texting with some loser dude who had forgotten she was mid-show, and their exchange appeared on a video screen (audience members actually yelled "No!" when he asked if she wanted to get together late-night). Then Barker and Wilks downed shots at the bar and proceeded to destroy the set to apocalyptic grime music; I think it was Dizzee Rascal. There were darker, more vulnerable scenes, too, as when Barker knelt to cover her arm with adhesive bandages.

Woven through these set pieces, duets and solos full of slashing, contorted movement flowed in and out of unison, apropos of the theme of malfunctioning communication. The quality of the dancing came as no surprise. What I was not prepared for was the finely pointed writing and, especially, the refinement of the acting. This was necessary for a script that required finding emotional nuances in hollowed-out, repetitive phrases and broken conversations that made me think of Samuel Beckett by way of a motivational seminar.

The duo's facial expressions, vocal inflections and body language showed polished comedic and dramatic timing, and were often seamlessly braided through choreographed physical exchanges. In one section, a fragmented volley of passive-aggressive variations on the words "It's fine" coruscated with flippancy, irony, sincerity, insecurity, frustration, ambivalence, uncertainty and other mercurial emotional temperatures.

As much as it was about movement, the piece was about the way people talk to each other—especially one way in particular, with a sort of disingenuous good cheer and blithe encouragement that conceals turbulent depths. It was about looking for (or running from) love in the 20-something bar scene. It was about the difficulties of neutral communication, and the blurry matrix of ambition, self-esteem, egotism and hubris with which all artists must contend.

But the most charged, interesting undercurrent had to do with the actual relationship between two close friends collaborating in the same field at different stages of recognition. Wilks, a recent **Indies Arts Awards winner**, is the local dance name on everyone's lips; Barker is still making her mark (this was her company's local debut). This slanted balance, tipped in the introductory vignette, acted as a subterranean pressure, occasionally jutting out of the comedy and mayhem and angular yet elegant movement in lacerating shards.

For example, there was a sequence where Barker tried and deliberately failed to execute a maneuver that Wilks had just done. And, even more pointedly, there was the explosive moment punctuating the sequence where Barker and Wilks pantomimed stepping on each other's toes and interrupting each other's sentences. As the push-and-pull built to peak intensity, seeming on the verge of spilling out into violence, Wilks shouted, "I'm trying to do this professionally, Anna!" Her voice was hard and bright, ripping out with genuine force.

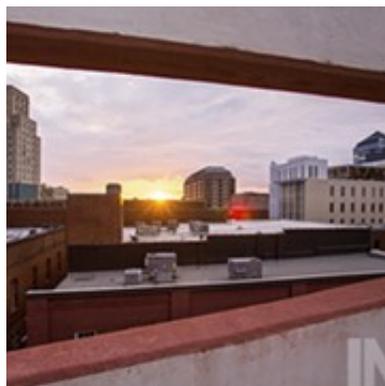
This was a dance where some deep, tough, personal stuff had been exhumed, digested but then left partially, and I think courageously, in plain view. It felt like an uncommonly honest performance, which lent it vitality, even danger. The structure wasn't flawless—a slow passage after the first set piece felt like it could have been cut, or at least moved later in the sequence, after the spell had been cast—but I found myself thinking about the piece for days afterward, especially those moments when sharp interpersonal angles leapt out.

It was a more auspicious than expected debut for Barker's `real.live.people.durham` and for DIDA, and a good primer on the aesthetics and values of the exciting new wave of Durham dance they represent.

Tags: Anna Barker, Leah Wilks, real.live.people.durham, it's not me it's you, Motorco, DIDA, dance review, Image

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