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DANCE / REVIEWS

Dance Review: In *Feature Presentation*, Anna Barker and Leah Wilks Comedically Remind Us of a Harsh Fact: Art Hurts

Posted by **Michaela Dwyer** on Wed, Jun 15, 2016 at 4:04 PM

real.live.people.durham: *Feature Presentation*

★★★★

Friday, June 10, 2016

The Trotter Building, Durham

A high school teacher of mine had many quotations painted in purplish blue on the cinderblocks outside her classroom, but the one I remember best is by the poet Gwendolyn Brooks: “Art hurts. Art urges voyages—and it is easier to stay at home.”

I left **real.live.people.durham's *Feature Presentation*** thinking of that quote. It's not that the performance hurt or upset me—on the contrary, it was bitingly clever and gorgeously, generously executed—but that it placed me and, I suspect, others in unusually close proximity to difficult artistic labors that often stay backstage.

From the start of **the piece, which premiered last weekend** to close the second season from **Durham Independent Dance Artists**, that divide subtly dissolves. **Anna Barker**, the piece's choreographer, and her collaborator, **Leah Wilks**—reunited after opening **the first DIDA season with *it's not me it's you***—frequently chat during costume changes “backstage,” which is onstage, represented by a vanity mirror framed with lights. They are already chatting

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photo by Brian Howe

The “backstage” dressing room area in *Feature Presentation*

before the show even begins, as do we in the audience. We're the performers' mirror images, which is fitting for a show concerned with big questions about authenticity, responsiveness, and self-image.

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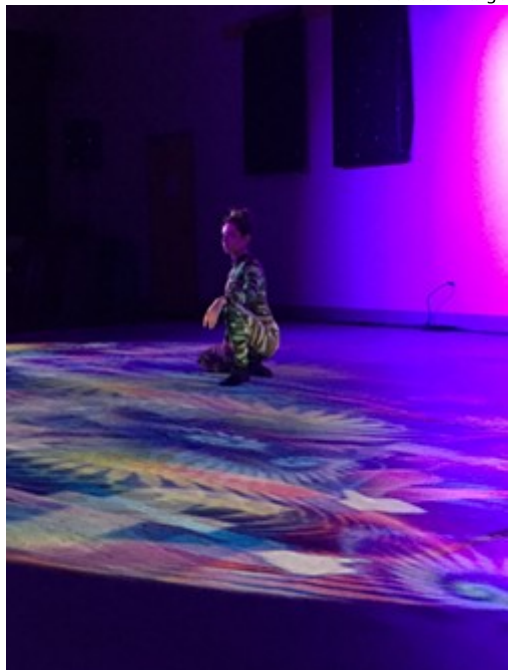


photo by Brian Howe

Anna Barker's Facebook safari in *Feature Presentation*

It's easy to slide into the vignettes that follow. Early on, Barker dons a camouflage unitard and wades into the iffy waters of Facebook etiquette, *Planet Earth*-style. She moves magnetically on the floor, her gaze fixed on the horizon (one populated, we imagine, by smiling photos of friends and exes).

In another scene, Barker recounts a disappointing Christmas gift exchange while Wilks pedals an outdated exercise bike. She reads from pieces of paper plucked from a wicker basket between the handlebars. The phrases are stock conversation movers (and stoppers), spliced awkwardly into Barker's narrative. Wilks discards each slip after reading it; they flutter in the bike fan's breeze.

Barker and Wilks have described the dance-theater vignettes as worlds unto themselves—or, as Barker says, “supporting arguments.” The music provides miniature bullet points. Accompanying a workout scene is a pumped up electronic score by Durham's TREEE City; later, in a jolting bit of *Tanztheater*, it's Edith Piaf. The interludes between scenes are also placed with care and a wink. During one, a pan flute rendition of “Hey Jude” blurs out the performers' dressing-room chitchat as a wince ripples through the audience.

There are many occasions for wincing, groans, and exclamations of “too real.” Halfway through, Liam O'Neill comes onstage to lead a “mid-performance discussion,” a parody of the sort of thing many flee from after shows. The performers want to know how we feel everything's going so far. Do we want more dancing? More linear narrative? Raise our hands if so. “Raise both hands if you're a critic,” Barker adds. I cover my face, chuckling, hiding.

This is a show about choices, about what we choose to reveal. In her choreography, Barker anticipates what an audience thinks it wants and pokes at it. After the discussion, she and Wilks perform a long, lovely, certifiably “dance-y” phrase. They sweep the stage, outstretched arms gathering the air, and they invert themselves more than a couple of times. They are tireless performers even in their exhaustion, as the concluding segments

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morph motivational speech and power poses into a hyperactive fitness routine. There's no particular rhythm to this fast, grueling segment, and the pacing grows uneven as pain gets personal.

photo by Brian Howe
Leah Wilks and Anna Barker in
Feature Presentation

Feature Presentation begins and ends with us watching the performers sweat. What has changed by the end? Did it work? Did they succeed? These are the questions Barker and Wilks continually pose, but I don't feel anxious to answer them. I'm stuck thinking about how much we demand of dance artists. I'm thinking of one vignette in particular, in which Barker presides over a fictional modern dance audition. Her frustrated response to Wilks's more-than-competent efforts: Make the movement sensual and abstract and "like a gibbon" but also "abundantly clear." Transform the audience. Go on a juice cleanse before your next audition. *Then you can start, the flute toots, to make it better.*

It is easier to stay at home, to judge art from afar, to absorb from others the state and the trials of local dance. But the newest work from [real.live.people.durham](#) demands our attention and presence. In return, Barker gives us a space where dance can be so many things: argument, joy, virtuosic movement, floor-falls, spoken anecdote. The work leads us out into the night and back, ultimately, to ourselves.

Tags: Dance, Durham Independent Dance Artists, DIDA, [real.live.people.durham](#), Feature Presentation, Anna Barker, Leah Wilks, Image

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