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Dance Film Meets Cringe Comedy in the Latest Chapter of Anna



Barker's Unfinished Autobiography

"I think there's always some moment of realization of not wanting to be taken advantage of. Sometimes it happens slowly. I am not interested in putting a bow on any of this, right? Because life is not like that. The struggle never goes away."

BY BRIAN HOWE DEC. 22, 2021 6:30 A.M.



Anna Barker in a still from 'Level Up' | Photo by Ned Phillips

***Level Up* | Vimeo On Demand through Jan. 13, \$10**

Although I'm a big fan of the Durham dance-theater artist **Anna Barker's work**, I haven't written about it since the first multimedia show by her company, *real.live.people*, premiered in 2014. We became friends after that, and my conflicts regarding her new dance film, *Level Up*, are



hopelessly numerous. I even pop up as a background extra in a bar scene.

But friendship—as a measuring stick, a balance beam, and a bracing pillar—is one of Anna's perennial themes, so perhaps this impartial conversation won't go amiss.

Mainly funded by a grant from the North Carolina Arts Council, *Level Up* was filmed by Ned Phillips and edited by Emily Jean Frachtling. It's both an omnibus and an extension of Anna's three evening-length stage works, with video as a container for dance instead of the other way around.

With plentiful callbacks, it also adds to the saga of a dancer named Anna who is grappling with the meaning of success amid systemic wreckage in a very recognizable Durham. It's populated by some dancer-actors playing themselves (especially Barker's best friend and company co-founder, Leah Wilks) and others in character, like poor Christopher Grohs, hilariously cast against type as a boorish mansplainer.

Infusing modern dance into a cringe comedy about bad dates, service-job humiliations, sexist auditions, brutal rehearsals, and unclear payoffs, the work is about the struggle that produces the work. Its laughs are slipping masks for pains and fears; one gripping set-piece conjures the hemmed-in feeling of an encounter with a menacing man.

With the majority of the 45-minute runtime given to narrative, *Level Up* is accessible by design, greeting curious newcomers with a Sylvan Esso song (donated, as were all of the familiar locations in this “love letter to Durham”), along with original music by Barker's regular collaborator, the composer Adam Lindquist. *Level Up* premiered at PS37 in September, and now it's [available to rent](#) for \$10 via Vimeo On Demand through January 13.

INDY WEEK: There's a lot of theater in your dance theater, so I'm not surprised that there's a lot of film in your



dance film. *Level Up* is almost a narrative short about a dancer, isn't it?

ANNA BARKER: “Dance film” has a connotation of abstraction, and because of my mission statement about accessibility, I really didn't want to make that. After my first show at Motorco, my grandmother said to me, “Well, that wasn't dance, but I did like it.” That's great. I don't care if people think it's dance or theater or whatever. I love breaking down those barriers because sometimes people are afraid of dance or feel they don't have the right words.

This is basically your fourth evening-length work with the same themes of trying and failing and trying again, with Leah as your friend and collaborator and Christopher playing these awful mansplainers, this time an axe thrower instead of a disc golfer.

Very rarely do we make something up. These are experiences that I've had or that Leah has had. Whether I'm dealing with relationship failures, or as a dancer, or what my ideal version of success looks like now versus five years ago, I just try to get really specific. There are a lot of other people who've experienced similar things, and I want them to be able to see themselves. What is more universal than the idea of personalized success and failure?

I also think that it's interesting to be releasing this film now because it's highlighting so much failure in the dance community—for example, how auditions work, where a



man with no experience can get picked over a woman with 30 years of experience. I was worried if it would still be relevant, but there's been a total upheaval in what the dance community is prepared to return to—not being paid for rehearsals, for travel, hurting your body dancing on a concrete floor. People who've seen the film are saying, "That's exactly what we don't want to go back to."

Your life-work boundary is pretty porous, which makes Leah an interesting character—your key collaborator, but also someone you kind of measure yourself against.

I think that exists in almost any friendship, particularly in the dance world. When I was living in New York all my friends were dancers. I would see them in auditions, and we were so competitive that we wouldn't even talk to each other. There's something really awful about how any semblance of community goes completely out of the window when you have to compete.

So yeah, I'm talking about Leah here, my best friend who does everything with me. But this is not just about me and Leah. This is about two women who are doing something together and are going to run into competitive feelings, all related to the idea of success. It's about this larger issue. But, you know, a lot of people have told me that they think the film is about my friendship with Leah.

So, there's this Anna character, and she keeps going through the same things over and over. Do you see change and growth for her, or is she just stuck, rolling a boulder up a hill?

I see growth. I think there's always some moment of realization of not wanting to be taken advantage of. Sometimes it happens slowly. I am not interested in putting a bow on any of this, right? Because life is not like that. The struggle never goes away.

For me, the character is about being very honest about the difficulties of being an artist at my age, and a woman, and then doing what we all do, which is kind of getting on with it. I try to find these moments of humanity. I'm always



going to be afraid of failure. I'm always going to be striving for something, and the grass is always going to be greener. But if there's not a resolution, there are always these moments of recovery, where I look around and I'm still intact. I still have my body, and I can move forward, and life is hilarious and difficult.

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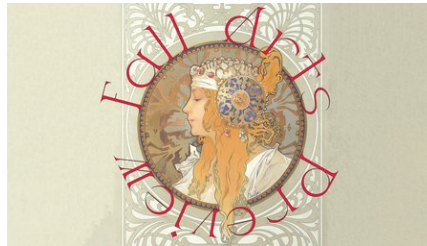
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