

Alexandra Bodnarchuk Asks ‘Why’ Through Dance

When dealing with an eating disorder, one doesn’t choose to recover, says dance artist Alexandra Bodnarchuk, one chooses to stop killing themselves. “It’s a daily choice to live,” she says. Her latest, original production, *Something Pretty* - which world premiered at the Kelly Strayhorn Theater in August - tackled the subject head-on.

Visiting Bodnarchuk’s website, one is struck by two things. First, the fact that a question is immediately posed - What is honesty in dance? Bodnarchuk, who has studied both in America and in Europe, and performed across the country, says the question is really for herself.

“It’s a reminder to me to constantly be asking ‘Why?’. Why am I making this decision? What is the intention behind this gesture? This hand? This jump? Why is my weight in this foot?”

The difference between “how is it” and “why” is vastly important in the arts; one can study the reasoning behind their craft, but there is no real reason. Asking why is a lifelong pursuit; and Bodnarchuk, who has been studying dance since the age of 2, is not giving up on this pursuit.

The second striking thing about Bodnarchuk is that she doesn’t merely call herself a dancer or a ballerina, a performer or a choreographer. She calls herself a dance artist.

“The distinction is that I’m not being told what to do by somebody else. The work I’m creating is my idea and I’m constantly looking at ways to make it better, constantly asking ‘why’.”

Again, the idea of why. It’s a huge question which Bodnarchuk’s new show wishes to engage.

Something Pretty, which originated from Bodnarchuk’s own experiences in the past, will feature herself, five professional dancers and two non-dancers, as well as music by Brandon Musser; the show aims to physicalize the struggles of disorders like anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa (a striking image of Bodnarchuk figuratively pulling skin off of her body, taken by well-known Pittsburgh photographer Hannah Altman, displays the show’s intent clearly). Each performance seeks to open a dialogue within the audience about what these illnesses are.

“I want to show everyone how ugly this can be, to help break down the stigma of talking about an eating disorder.”

Bodnarchuk realizes that using dance to criticize dance is a risky proposition, but it’s also an important one. She hopes to make people ask why these disorders have been normalized within the industry. For example, Bodnarchuk says a former nutritionist of the Pittsburgh Ballet told her that from subclinical disordered eating to full blown eating disorders, over half of the dancers they’d worked with would fall on the continuum of having a disorder.

“It’s almost a cliché how common it is,” Bodnarchuk says, “And it’s a problem that we have that cultural mindset.”

A mindset, she admits, she shared while growing up.

“Wanting to be a dancer, I wanted to look like the other dancers,” she says. “You’d see the really thin girls on stage and think, ‘Well, I wasn’t cast in that piece.’ You’re trying to put two and two together, asking ‘What do I need to do to get there?’”

For many, Bodnarchuk fears, getting there means eating less or restricting themselves in unhealthy ways. In *Something Pretty*, her character goes down that path until she’s on the edge of self-destruction. Later in the show she has the chance to go further down that path, but chooses not to.

“Throughout the course of your disease you’re given the choice to love yourself,” she says. “At the bottom of this show is the idea that you have a choice to decide if you’re worth it. And you are.”

Alexandra Bodnarchuk’s character makes that choice — to love herself — but that doesn’t mean things will get easier. Her work as a dance artist, in seeing honesty, can ask the question, Why? However, that is a question it cannot answer.

Something Pretty will navigate the battle one has when having to decide, day by day, to live.

“I’m not trying to make a happy ending because I know this is an ongoing struggle.”