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Aszure Barton will be Hubbard Street Dance Chicago's next resident choreographer

By Lauren Warnecke

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Hubbard Street Dance Company's incoming choreographer-in-residence Aszure Barton, center, is with artistic director Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell inside the Hubbard Street Dance studio in Chicago on Jan. 11, 2023. (Lou Foglia/for the Chicago Tribune)

Internationally renowned Canadian American choreographer Aszure Barton will be Hubbard Street Dance Chicago's next artist-in-residence. The appointment follows a long vacancy after resident choreographer Alejandro Cerrudo's departure in 2018.

“Aszure is one of the most important choreographers of the 21st century,” said Hubbard Street artistic director Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell. “I’ve always been a fan of her work. For her to find trust and stability with us is huge.”

Barton’s arrangement, set to begin in the fall, is dissimilar to Cerrudo’s time as resident choreographer, a title he held for 10 years. Cerrudo lived in Chicago full-time and, until 2015, was also a dancer in the company. He now leads Charlotte Ballet.

Barton’s tenure is likely to be more transient. She’ll come to Chicago for two weeks here, four weeks there, ad libitum.

Barton’s residency is also less focused on output. Hubbard Street may perform existing works from her catalog. There may be new works, too. A semi-firm plan includes three or four pieces in the span of three years, but the primary goal is to afford Barton luxurious time, space and some of the country’s best dancers to hone her craft. That stands in stark contrast to the typical commissioning structure in large dance companies, in which independent choreographers traverse the country churning out completed works in the span of three to six weeks.

Specifics are intentionally loose. Fisher-Harrell compares the residency to The Tharp Project, an initiative in partnership with prolific choreographer Twyla Tharp from 1990-1995. The Tharp Project took place during Fisher-Harrell’s brief tenure as a dancer in Hubbard Street before she joined Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. During the five-year period, Tharp staged several existing works on Hubbard Street that became a cornerstone of their aesthetic in the ‘90s: “Nine Sinatra Songs,” “Fugue” and “Fait Accompli” among them. The project culminated in a new work titled “I Remember Clifford.”

“But this is even deeper and richer,” said Fisher-Harrell. “There’s the opportunity to set this space and time aside for Aszure to work with these brilliant artists and see what comes out.”

“There was no question for me,” Barton said in an interview with the Tribune. “I have been asked in the past if I would consider being an artist-in-residence somewhere — which is exciting and wonderful. However, there was this welcoming warmth (at Hubbard Street) and real support of who I am as a human being and how that feeds the work. Sometimes you just know who you can trust.”



Hubbard Street Dance Chicago's incoming choreographer-in-residence Aszure Barton, right, with artistic director Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell inside the dance company's Water Tower Place studio. (Lou Foglia/for the Chicago Tribune)

Barton's history with Hubbard Street stems back 20 years. At the dawn of her career, she created "I" for Hubbard Street 2, and in 2010 made "Untouched" for the main company.

Chicago has had only glimpses of her work since; Barton's pick-up company performed "Aaaa" at the now-shuttered Chicago Dancing Festival in 2016. A year later, the Cuban company Malpaso (led by Osnel Delgado, [who would later collaborate](#) with Hubbard Street) performed her "Indomitable Waltz" [as part of an evening](#) at the Dance Center of Columbia College.

Then there's "Busk." First staged in 2009, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre performed an iteration of this work in Chicago [days before the pandemic shutdown](#). We saw "Busk" again a year and a half later as part of Hubbard Street's [return to the stage in 2021](#). Barton spent a few weeks with the company restaging the piece, which has remained in regular rotation ever since.

"Busk' became a different piece when I was here," Barton said. "When you're in a space that really carries you and believes in you — it's that simple sometimes."

The announcement is also a symbolic show of strength for Hubbard Street. Cerrudo's 2018 departure was followed by a cascade of events (some a direct result of the pandemic, some not) that include the sale of their West Loop building and change of artistic directors. Fisher-Harrell came into that role [in 2021](#).

With a new home studio at Water Tower Place, staff at near-capacity, and now a three-year financial commitment to a single choreographer, Hubbard Street's once-shaky ground appears to have solidified.

"Through all the ups and downs there's been a commitment to being a world-class company," said executive director David McDermott. "That's where we put our resources. If you don't invest in the art, it's not going to work."

McDermott declined to say what the residency will cost Hubbard Street. He noted precedents set by investing in Tharp and Cerrudo as periods in Hubbard Street's history in which public buy-in and artistic excellence catalyzed financial stability for the company.

"Moving back into a relationship like this with a world-class choreographer is a total no-brainer," he said.