

# Exclusive: Monica Bill Barnes is Not Just Another Nut on the Street

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March 6, 2009

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Photo credit: Art Piccalo

New Yorkers are notoriously difficult to shock – we in fact take a certain snobbish pride in our ability to affect indifference to the barrage of curiosities we encounter every day. A guy playing guitar in his tighties in the middle of Times Square? Yawn. *Law & Order* filming on our block? Not again.

And yet, amid this landscape of overstimulation, there are some things that make us stop and look. Choreographer Monica Bill Barnes' whimsical site-specific dances are undoubtedly among them. For eight days last August, she and five dancers descended on Robert Wagner Jr. Park dressed as sightseers, sunbathers and park rangers, and proceeded to dance their hearts out to Elvis Presley songs. And in 2005 she and her company literally made a splash when they performed in a fountain in Bowling Green Park.

Of course Barnes, whom critics have dubbed the Downtown Darling, doesn't choreograph solely for parks and fountains. She has twelve evening-length dances under her belt, and her work has been performed in theaters throughout New York City, across the country and overseas. Now, New Yorkers have a chance to see a brand-new piece, *Another Parade*, which is being shown this weekend as part of the 92nd Street Y Harkness Dance Festival.

After the jump, we talk to Barnes about *Another Parade*, why she likes site-specific performances and whether she's as funny as the critics say she is.

**Flavorwire:** Tell us a little bit about your new piece.

**Monica Bill Barnes:** It's an evening-length quartet, just under an hour. A lot of it addresses questions about performing – the highs and lows, the particular desire of each of person to perform, and what you end up exposing and what you keep to yourself. There are a lot of ideas about how performers rely on and relate to the audience: Why have I made a whole life of having people pay to see me perform? It's wonderfully co-dependent, and sometimes feels a little unhealthy.

**FW:** What appeals to you about site-specific work?

**MMB:** I have a real interest in having dance be something that's very popular – not necessarily accessible, which sometimes in the arts can be a bad word, but in that it exists more immediately in people's lives. And one way to physically do that is to bring the dance into a public place and make it part of that day's events.

I try to do work that will hold attention in the vast arena of New York City; it tends to be a little shorter and the music tends to be familiar. And I try to make the event stand on its own, so that somebody can take notice and move around it. I don't tend to put my most challenging work in the middle of a fountain. It's great for us as performers, because you don't have any illusion that what you're doing is very precious. You see how people respond to you in the moment and you get interrupted and have to figure out how to respond to that.

**FW:** What kinds of reactions do you get from people when you're performing outdoors?

**MMB:** A lot of times, right in the middle of a piece someone will walk right up and start talking to us. In Robert Wagner Park, we were in mid-step, and this woman walked up and said, 'This is so great. Is this a group? Can I join?' And every once in a while there's somebody who says, 'You can't be doing this.' [Dancing in public spaces] sort of flies in the face of what we think of as appropriate. But we are allowed, and we actually have a dancing permit.

**FW:** Critics are always remarking on the wittiness of your work, noting that humor is not something that turns up in dance very often. Why are you drawn to using humor?

**MMB:** I actually seldom intend to be funny. When people first started writing about me, they would say, 'That was so funny!' And at first that sort of hurt my feelings because the piece was intentionally tragic. I'm constantly interested in different awkward situations or uncomfortable moments, and I think those tend to be viewed as comic, but any great comedy that I'm drawn to has tragedy in it. So I think it's a way that the dancers are representing something that we've all experienced at times – feeling overdressed for a situation or stumbling and trying to respond to that, very common or minor tragedies. And when you theatricalize that, it's very easy to laugh at. Most of the time, we're actually taking ourselves quite seriously, and I think somehow that earnest effort is sort of funny – like a truly, deeply invested group of high school students doing Hamlet. It's kind of funny, partially because they're so serious about it.

Exclusive Monica Bill Barnes