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'This American Life' creator Ira Glass does mash-up with modern dancers to open Book Fair

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On Stage: Ira Glass, above center, is flanked by Anna Bass, left, and Monica Bill Barnes in 'Three Acts, Two Dancers, One Radio Host.'

Ira Glass, creator and voice of the popular public radio show *This American Life* (<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/>), tells stories purely with words.

"It's broadcasting," he says. "We live entirely in the world of things you can articulate."

And that is why Glass was drawn to the innately non-articulate form of dance, joining forces with choreographer Monica Bill Barnes and dancer Anne Bass for *Three Acts, Two Dancers, One Radio Host*, the one-of-a-kind live show (<http://3acts2dancers1radiohost.com/>) the trio performs on Nov. 16 to open the Miami Book Fair International.

"What's exciting about working with dancers is it adds this thing you could never do on radio," Glass says from *This American Life's* New York office. "We have basically put one utterly verbal and one utterly nonverbal medium together. We are the only ones who thought this would be a good idea."

Actually, quite a few people have thought *Three Acts* (<http://vimeo.com/79705698>) is a good idea, starting with the audience for its debut at New York's Carnegie Hall in 2013 and continuing with a successful (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/02/arts/dance/three-acts-stars-ira-glass-and-monica-bill-barnes.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar%2C%7B%221%22%3A%22RI%3A7%22%7D&_r=0)

string of performances since. The Miami show, which is co-presented by the Book Fair and Miami Dade College Live Arts, takes place at downtown's Gusman Center for the Performing Arts.

Barnes says she and Glass clicked creatively as soon as they met, in 2011, at a New York contest spoofing TV's *Dancing With the Stars*, where Glass was a celebrity performer and Barnes was a judge. "He was really good — he did a lot of lifting," Barnes says, speaking by phone as she walked through New York's Soho district. "He would be the first to say he had a very small partner. But I like things that are amateur."

Afterwards Glass came to see her troupe, Monica Bill Barnes & Company (<http://www.monicabillbarnes.com/company/company.html>), which has earned a reputation for staging theatrically astute, often comic pieces that are a kind of hybrid of modern dance and vaudeville. He wrote Barnes "one of the best emails I've ever gotten," she says. "He said I feel like what you're doing with dance is like what I'm trying to do on the radio, uncovering the way people are ... that you're also celebrating this humanity and embracing the awkward side of all of us."

They began to experiment together.

"This didn't come from "we've got a great show on our hands,"" says Barnes. "It felt like new territory, and that makes it the right thing to try."

They went through archives of Glass' radio shows and Barnes' own repertory, searching for common ground. "We didn't want the dancing to represent the story or him to describe the dancing," Barnes says.

Their first eureka moment came with Glass' only radio piece about dancers. "It was about somebody in the touring company of *Riverdance* and the dancers getting bored doing the same thing every night, and the steps they take to prevent their own boredom" says Glass. "So it's really about the job of being a dancer." Barnes choreographed a repetitive movement sequence she and Bass do over and over. "At first you don't see the connection," she says. "Then the two things start to operate in a way that feels related."

That segment was the seed of what eventually became the first of their three acts. “One set is about the job of being a dancer,” says Glass. “One set is about love, because it’s big enough that you can make a dance about it. And one act is about nothing lasting forever, about losing what you love.”

Most difficult — and powerful — for Barnes were the sections that evolved from being on the other end of Glass’ considerable skills as an interviewer. “I talked about what it was like when I realized as a 9-year-old that you couldn’t dance forever and I was completely devastated,” she says. She cried “buckets. My parents were so confused.”

That led to a discussion of her age — she was about to turn 40.

“The crux of the interview is what do you do when you’ve spent a life creating a career that has an endpoint,” she says. “It’s a hard thing to be on stage and hear myself talking about that.”

Glass made his own discoveries interviewing Bass, who talked about the close relationship that has evolved in years of dancing with Barnes. “They’re very competitive with each other, and Barnes will add surprises during the dance that catch [Bass] unawares,” he says. “It was very funny. So there’s one dance where you hear the secret story going on between the two of them, while they do this beautiful duet.”

And so, one by one, they built these hybrid moments. “We didn’t want the dancing to represent the story or [Glass] to describe the dancing,” Barnes says. “So that as an audience member you’re being asked to create the meaning.”

Both she and Glass are pleased, if somewhat at a loss to explain what they’ve created. “It’s a show with its own aesthetic,” Glass says. “It’s different from other dance shows or spoken word things. There comes a moment on stage when I can feel the audience go OK, now I get it.”

But he emphasizes that, as with his radio show or Barnes’ dance company, *Three Acts* aims to entertain. “For the audience, I feel like when you say there’s gonna be dancing, the general population feel that it’s going to be hard. Like oh, there’ll be poetry.”

“It’s gonna be fun. It has this feeling of the radio show ... it’s a very emotional version of the radio show.”

Glass, who is on stage for much of *Three Acts* and has lost 30 pounds in the course of working on it, will not reveal whether he actually dances in the show. He does admit he is no closer to being a virtuoso mover than when Barnes first saw him. "I think I'll stick with the lucrative field of public broadcasting," he says.

But he has become much more appreciative of what dancers do.

"It totally changes how I see the way people move," he says. "Certain things dancers do that are so hard to do well, I appreciate now in a way I never could before."

That extends to amateurs like himself. "I was weirdly touched by Taylor Swift's video *Shake It Off*. She's the amateur trying to dance with the pros, and the video is one Lucille Ball-ish moment after another of her not doing as well as them. I related to that."

IF YOU GO

What: 'Three Acts, Two Dancers, One Radio Host'

When: 5 p.m. Nov. 16

Where: Olympia Theater at Gusman Center, 174 E. Flagler St., Miami

Info: \$35 to \$55, mdclivearts.org (<http://mdclivearts.org/events/three-acts-two-dancers-one-radio-host/>) or 305-237-3010