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Cal Performances Press Room





Photos of Ambrose Akinmusire (top left), Aszure Barton (top right),
and A a | a B : B E N D (bottom) are available for download from the Cal Performances Press Room.
A video trailer for A a | a B :B E N D and an interview with Ambrose Akinmusire and Aszure Barton can be found on YouTube.
Aszure Barton is also featured in the Cal Performances-produced video Embodied Experience.

CAL PERFORMANCES AT UC BERKELEY PRESENTS PERFORMANCES FEATURED IN THE *ILLUMINATIONS*: "INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE" SERIES

The West Coast Premiere of
A a | a B : B E N D,
a Vibrant and Visionary Collaboration Between
Composer/Musician Ambrose Akinmusire and
Choreographer Aszure Barton
Friday–Saturday, December 4–5 at Zellerbach Hall

Berkeley, CA, October 15, 2026—Cal Performances at UC Berkeley presents the West Coast premiere of a work by two leading innovators in their respective fields—composer/musician **Ambrose Akinmusire** and choreographer **Aszure Barton**—with **A a | a B : B E N D**, a collaborative work of dance and live music, at Zellerbach Hall on Friday, December 4 at 7:30pm and Saturday, December 5 at 7:30pm.

Aszure Barton and Ambrose Akinmusire were inevitable collaborators, both deeply interested in the nature of energy: how it moves, how it lands, how it fills a space. Oakland-born composer, trumpeter, and educator Ambrose Akinmusire is recognized for creating music that moves fluidly between improvisation, composition, and sound, unbound by genre. His approach finds a natural counterpart in the work of Aszure Barton, whose credits include *Mere Mortals* (2024) an evening-length work commissioned by the San Francisco Ballet that was received with immense critical and popular acclaim. Over the past five years, Akinmusire and Barton have developed an ongoing creative partnership, creating work together for Hamburg Ballett and Limón Dance Company, among others. Their collaboration has been described by *tanz* magazine as "a refusal of categorization that draws its appeal from two artists who, completely secure in their fields, playfully unsettle each other."

Their shared artistic language is at the heart of B E N D (2023), bringing Barton's choreography and Akinmusire's live musical improvisation into an ongoing dialogue. By turns hypnotic and mysterious, exuberant and explosive, B E N D explores overlapping zones of human friction, connection, trust, and endurance. On a spare, kinetically lit stage, 12 dancers in black respond in real time as Akinmusire improvises upstage on electronics and trumpet alongside recorded rhythmic tracks. Barton builds the work from prompts, simple questions posed to the dancers, multitasking the body until it takes over and creates its own choreographic language. The result is a work grounded in both structure and spontaneity, with a shared, responsive vocabulary that is never the same from one performance to the next.

“I think the live element is there to challenge not only the dancers, but the audience,” Akinmusire said. “I feel like I'm dissecting the piece and then putting it back together. What I'm paying the most attention to is how the dancers are feeling. How can I influence them? How can I challenge them? My role is like a conductor—to inspire the dancers. ‘Endurance’ is a big part of it. When I think about B E N D, I think about what it means to endure physically, mentally, spiritually—how much you can actually bend before you break.”

For Barton, that physical and emotional endurance is also part of a larger process of learning how to move, listen, and create together. “For me, B E N D is inseparable from the way Aszure Barton & Artists (AB&A), my crew, works,” Barton said. “It's trust, it's process, transformation, relationship, the belief that we grow by sharing space. B E N D is a world Ambrose and I have been creating together since 2023, bending toward each other, letting go of control, unlearning and learning to truly move with another artist. That means trusting Ambrose, the dancers, and what happens when none of us are fully steering. Everyone in that room, including the audience, has a hand in shaping it. It's respect, embodied. It's people lifting each other up.”

Also contributing to the production are lighting designer Bonnie Beecher, video designer Tobin Del Cuore, and costume designer Rémi van Bochove, with original lighting and scenery by Nicole Pearce.

A graduate of the Berkeley High School Jazz Ensemble, **Ambrose Akinmusire** went on to win the prestigious Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition in 2007 and was voted first in the annual *DownBeat* Critics Poll's "Trumpet" category for eight consecutive years (2013–20). As a bandleader or co-leader, he has released 10 albums and received two Grammy nominations, most recently for *Owl Song* (with Bill Frisell and Herlin Riley) and *honey from a winter stone* (2025), which draws together elements of classical, jazz, rap, dance, and sound art. His collaborators span a wide range of creative practices and include Jason Moran, esperanza spalding, Vijay Iyer, Oumou Sangaré, Kendrick Lamar, and Joni Mitchell. Throughout these projects, his work insists on music’s power to bear witness, honor lives lost, and create new spaces for community and imagination. Not strictly beholden to tradition, he has acknowledged the desire to honor his “lineage of Black invention and innovation … without being stifled by it.” Akinmusire is Director of Jazz at Stanford University, where he is also Associate Professor of Music, and in 2023 was named Artistic Director of the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz Performance.

For more than 25 years, Aszure Barton has energized the contemporary dance world. She has been making dances since her days as a student at Canada’s National Ballet School. In the early 2000s, she founded AB&A in New York, an ongoing creative engine for process-driven collaboration. She has worked across dance, theater, opera, and film, and her work has been shown in a number of museum

exhibits. Mikhail Baryshnikov became an early champion of her work, naming her an inaugural Artist in Residence at Baryshnikov Arts. She has since worked with artists and companies including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, American Ballet Theatre, Martha Graham Dance Company, Nederlands Dans Theater, Paris Opera Ballet, and Teatro alla Scala. Barton is House Choreographer at Gauthier Dance | Theaterhaus Stuttgart and was Resident Artist at Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. She is an ambassador of contemporary choreography in Canada, where she has been honored with the coveted Arts & Letters Award, and is a recipient of a New York Dance and Performance ("Bessie") Award. She is also an active Fellow at the Center for Ballet and the Arts at New York University and a Creative Partner at Boston Conservatory at Berklee, and has a longstanding relationship with the Juilliard School.

A a | a B in the billing for their collaboration is an amalgam of the two creators' initials.

***Illuminations*: "Innocence & Experience"**

B E N D is a featured presentation this year of Cal Performances' annual *Illuminations* series that connects extraordinary artistry with groundbreaking scholarship at UC Berkeley. During the 2026–27 season, *Illuminations* events investigate the theme of "Innocence & Experience" and how these intertwined forces transform each other and influence our sense of the world. With B E N D the creative collaboration brings choreography and music into a shared field of constraint and possibility. In it, "experience" is expressed in structure, method, and form—the accumulated knowledge of training, composition, and systematized thinking—while "innocence" manifests as experimentation and risk, and movement or sound before it settles into order. In the Cal Performances-produced video Embodied Experience, Barton describes how she uses physical prompts and collaborative improvisation to move dancers beyond conscious control and preconceived ideas, allowing the body—and the collective creative process—to generate new forms of expression. Descriptions of how all six distinct *Illuminations* presentations this season connect to the theme can be found in "The Philosopher's Guide", an article on Cal Performances' *Beyond the Stage* blog. Information about live *Illuminations* events with UC Berkeley scholars that expand on the ideas of "Innocence & Experience" are posted to calperformances.org/illuminations.

A a | a B : B E N D is produced by Pomegranate Arts and TO Live. Creative and Executive Producers, Linda Brumbach, Alisa E. Regas

A a | a B : B E N D is a project of the National Arts Centre's National Creation Fund and was staged with the support of Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity through a theatre production residency in August and September 2025.

A a | a B : B E N D was originally commissioned and produced by Kampnagel International Summer Festival (World Premiere 2023) with Aszure Barton & Artists; co-commissioned by UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance, The Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture and the Ford Theatre Foundation, and Northrop at the University of Minnesota.

CALENDAR EDITORS PLEASE NOTE:
Cal Performances presents

Friday, December 4, 7:30pm
Saturday, December 5, 7:30pm

Zellerbach Hall
Bancroft Way at Dana Street
UC Berkeley campus

Dance/Jazz
Ambrose Akinmusire & Aszure Barton
A a | a B : B E N D, West Coast premiere

Aszure Barton, *choreographer and director*
Ambrose Akinmusire, *composer, electronics, and trumpet*

Program:
Two leading lights in their fields—choreographer Aszure Barton and composer/musician Ambrose Akinmusire—create an urgent, intimate, yet wildly provocative world in which dancers and musician come together onstage in a thrilling embrace of human friction, tension, and explosive beauty, inspired by the concept of "unlearning." Barton is known for mining complex choreographic terrain in her works, as in her *Mere Mortals* at San Francisco Ballet in 2024. Oakland's own Akinmusire performs his instrumental and electronics score live.

An *Illuminations*: "Innocence & Experience" event. Visit calperformances.org/illuminations for details.

Post-Performance Discussion:
Friday, December 4, immediately following the performance
Zellerbach Hall stage

Immediately following the December 4 performance, choreographer Aszure Barton and composer Ambrose Akinmusire will be joined onstage by UC Berkeley associate professor of dance Latanya d. Tigner for a wide-ranging conversation about the artists' collaboration, the creation of B E N D, and the work's relationship to Cal Performances' 2026–27 *Illuminations* theme, "Innocence & Experience."

Tickets: $40–$107 (prices subject to change)

Tickets for all performances are available at calperformances.org, by phone at (510) 642-9988, or in person at the Ticket Office at Zellerbach Hall, Tuesday–Sunday, noon–5pm.

There is a $15 per order service charge on ticket purchases made by phone or online that are not part of a subscription package; there is no fee for tickets purchased in person at the Zellerbach Hall Ticket Office. There is a $20 service charge on all subscription orders.

UC Berkeley students can access exclusive discounts, including half-price tickets in all sections of the theater, and are also eligible to purchase a limited number of $10 tickets for the best seats in the house for the Saturday, December 5 performance of A a | a B : B E N D through the Golden Bear Circle program beginning at noon on Friday, November 19, online only. Information about all UC Berkeley student programs and discounts is available at calperformances.org/ucb-students; information about other discounts can be found at calperformances.org/discounts.

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