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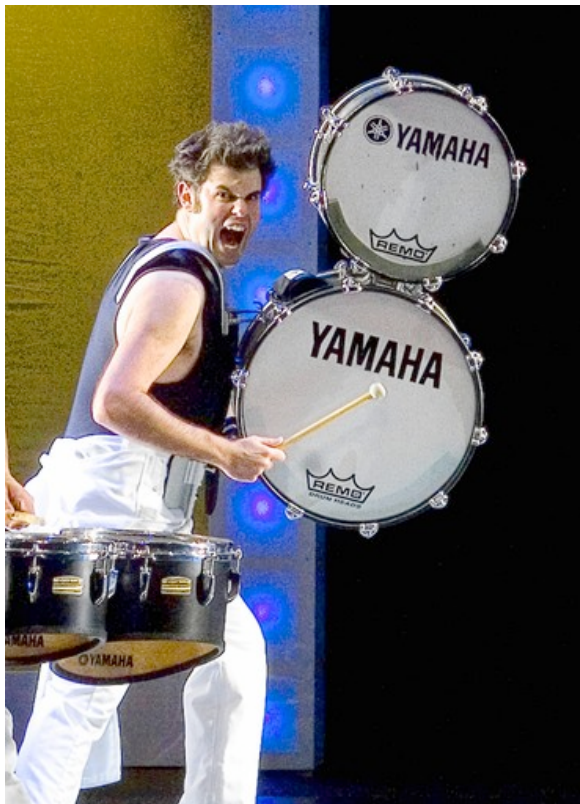
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Catasauqua man is having a 'Blast' on tour

Andrew Barlow plays all percussion roles in colorful stage show

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Andrew Barlow of Catasauqua plays all of the percussion roles in "Blast!", which comes to the State Theatre in Easton on Friday. (MICHAEL RENNE PHOTOGRAPHY, CONTRIBUTED PHOTO / March 1, 2011)

By Jodi Duckett, Of The Morning Call
6:46 P.M. EST, FEBRUARY 9, 2012

Andrew Barlow isn't just a percussionist. He's an athlete.

When he steps into his white jumpsuit every day and straps on his drums, he doesn't just make music. He struts, marches, dances and sometimes even leaps.

That's the way it is when you're a cast member of "Blast!", the joyous stage show that marries the movement and music of the marching band tradition with the sensibilities of a Broadway musical.

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Barlow, who lives in Catasauqua, has been on tour with "Blast!" since August and is excited to be returning to the Lehigh Valley Friday for a show at the State Theatre in Easton.

In the audience will be his wife, Melissa Babalonis, director of performing ensembles at YEA! (Youth Education in the Arts) in Allentown, where Barlow worked as director of development before joining "Blast!" Also cheering him on will be Allen Frank, band director at Wilson Area High School, where Barlow worked as an assistant for a season.

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And audiences do, quite literally, cheer as the cast of 35 combines drum and bugle corps pageantry, marching precision, and instrumental virtuosity with staging, dance moves and musical theater effects.

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"The show appeals to all ages and everyone," says Barlow in a phone interview from his tour bus. "A lot of people don't know what

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to expect. There's so many styles, from rock 'n' roll to techno jazz."

Barlow, 26, was in the marching band in high school in his native North Carolina and then at Mars Hill College, where he earned a degree in music. He went on to earn his master's in education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst with the goal of playing or teaching.

He landed in Allentown at YEA!, which manages the world champion Cadets drum and bugle corps.

He was encouraged to apply for "Blast!" by Babalonis, who spent seven years in the "visual ensemble" of "Blast!" that takes on the dancing and color guard roles. Babalonis was an original cast member of the show, which opened in London on Dec. 14, 1999 and then began touring across the United States and Japan. It was on Broadway and won the 2001 Tony for "Best Special Theatrical Event." It also won a 2001 Emmy for "Best Choreography" after a show on PBS.

Barlow's role is as percussion swing. "I do one role each night to give people a night off. I learned all the music. On any given night I could do featured solos or any of the percussion roles."

For example, some days he'll solo on snare. In Easton, he'll solo on marimba. The show features six percussionists, along with 19 brass players and 10 dancers.

Barlow says the show doesn't have a storyline, but is driven by the music. And the music is color-coordinated. The show uses changing colors to go on its journey, which helps to stimulate audience emotions.

"In the first act, 'Blast!' uses the cool colors and the show remains somewhat aloof. In terms of staging, we keep the show more onstage and separate from the audience," explains co-producer and artistic director James Mason. "Then with the second act, where we begin exploring the warm colors, we embrace the audience and

interact with them to bring them into our show and into our world. We actually send the cast out into the audience to make them feel part of the show."

Barlow says the genre of songs matches the mood of the colors. For jazz music, the stage is bathed in blue. Yellow sets the stage for funny stuff. It's mostly black when the percussion is featured. And when the lights turn green, the cast presents its only vocal number, the old folk hymn "Simple Gifts."

Barlow spends most of his time on a two-story platform with the other percussionists. But he's out and about a lot.

"Several times we come into the audience and perform."

Barlow says he is living the dream.

"This is a wonderful start to my music career. It's great."

Jodi.duckett@mcall.com

610-820-6704

BLAST

•When: 8 p.m. Friday

•Where: State Theatre, 452 Northampton St., Easton

•How much: \$55, \$60

•Info: <http://www.statetheatre.org>, 610-252-3132

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