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Peggy Baker in *Sanctum*

LOIS GREENFIELD

Peggy Baker

Solos by Baker, Molissa Fenley, James Kudelka, Doug Varone, and Paul-André Fortier At St. Mark's in-the-Bowery October 10 through 13

By Deborah Jowitz

Considered alone, many of the works on Peggy Baker's solo program are flawed, yet together they form a tasteful, variegated evening to display the marvel that is Peggy Baker.

Baker—trained as an actress as well as a dancer, a founding member of Canada's Dancemakers, a performer in Lar Lubovitch's company for eight years, recently one of Baryshnikov's White Oak gang—is tall and lean, with an almost masculine body. But although she can dance like a warrior goddess, she can also look touchingly uncertain, vulnerable,

her only flaw a tendency to do too much "acting."

In her own rather spare *Sanctum*, she's a shaman in a square of light that echoes the shape of the carpet on which composer Ahmed Hassan sits to play a variety of non-Western instruments: sticks that he whips against the air, bundles of pods. Strong and beautiful, she strikes carved poses, makes hieratic gestures, then erupts into a thrashing that ends as she throws the sticks into the air and the lights glare white for a second.

For the swatch of Molissa Fenley material called *Inner Enchantments* (to Philip Glass), Baker becomes supple, like clay warmed in your hand. She makes the arduous traveling steps look somehow gracious, her long, lithe arms scooping around her as if she were constantly gathering strength from the air and then giving it back.

James Kudelka's weird cartoon *This Isn't the End* presents her as a nurse, gleefully miming a mélange of sex, healing, and death—her actions (stretching out a condom, shooting a giant syringe into the air, etc.)—comically coinciding with words in a collage text drawn from British TV mysteries.

For Paul-André Fortier, in *Non Coupable*, she becomes an archetypal woman victim wrestling with the burdens that she also loves—in this case, two wrapped rocks attached by ropes to her wrists. She lugs them, drags them, disentangles herself, then can't quite balance without them. She pulls out a breast and nurses one, and jams them between her legs. The symbolism may be heavy-handed, but there are touching moments, and Baker's performance is sensitive and richly detailed.

One fine duet, *The Volpe Sisters*, scarcely a dance, by Doug Varone was a highlight of the evening. Baker, wearing spectacles, is a woman damaged in some way, watched over almost emotionlessly by Janie Brendel. Carol Mullins projects the image of windows with old-fashioned shades behind them, suggesting closeted lives. Sometimes Baker hurls her long body across Brendel's lap, but strains away. She bangs her head against the wall, shudders into fits. Everything between the women is careful and fugitively tender, as if love long ago had eroded into patience. ■