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Dance luminary
 Peggy Baker puts on
 a mesmerizing
 display of solo
 modern dance

Baker's intensity mesmerizing

By Michael Crabb
 SPECIAL TO THE STAR

The nature of modern dance does not readily lend itself to the creation of stars, yet Edmonton-born Peggy Baker is that rarest of mortals, a true modern-dance luminary.

Proof is readily at hand for anyone lucky enough to grab a ticket for this afternoon's matinee at the Premiere Dance Theatre, where Baker opened an all too brief Toronto appearance Friday night.

Although we have had glimpses of Baker over the past year or so in a few shared programs this is the statuesque dancer's first local appearance in her most recent incarnation as a solo artist, a career development that has already won her rapturous response in that testing mecca of modern dance, New York City.

For those who packed the Harbourfront theatre for Friday's opening — an audience, incidentally, that included a distinguished roster of local choreographers and fellow dancers — it

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was easy to see why Peggy Baker is so special.

Whether creating visual puns to John Oswald's witty whodunit voice collage in choreographer James Kudelka's *This Isn't The End*, or taking her audience into a world of almost ritualistic intimacy and emotional feeling in her own *Sanctum*, Baker's fierce intensity and physical power never falters.

Framed in *Sanctum* in a tiny rectangle of light, Baker seems part Earth Mother, part shaman, part warrior, as she elaborates a duet with composer/musician Ahmed Hassan who, resting in his own pool of light, creates a primal soundscape with such simple instruments as dried seed-pods, a clay-pot drum and a didgeridoo.

Baker's intensity, the way her sleek limbs carve space, is so mesmerizing that it can lend significance to even as insubstantial a work as Molissa Fenley's long

solo to Philip Glass, *Inner Enchantments*.

Take that same power and focus it on a searing portrait of womanhood such as that offered by Paul-Andre Fortier's *Non Coupable* and the emotional effect is volcanic. Her struggle with the symbolic rocks of female victimization takes on epic proportions as Baker, at first clutching, then hauling and later nursing her burden, reveals an inner tumult of dependency and fear of freedom.

Like all great dance artists, Baker's movement is distinguished as much by what she leaves out as by what she puts in. Shedding the cliched Isadora Duncanisms that so often go along with those famous *Opus 39* Brahms waltzes favored by the American dance pioneer, Peggy Baker instead mixes graceful lyricism with an economy of gesture and even moments of complete stillness in a solo that spans explosions of power with almost meditative serenity.

□ Michael Crabb is producer of CBC radio's *The Arts Report*.