

Solo Dancer Deserves Disciples' Reverence

DANCE

Peggy Baker

A Burnaby Summer Festival of Music and Dance presentation.

At the SFU Theatre on Friday, July 10

• BY SHANNON RUPP

That dance disciples speak of Peggy Baker in a reverent tone isn't surprising: she's clearly a high priestess of modern dance. Baker brings a spiritual quality to her work that explains why this Canadian is hailed as one of the world's great solo dancers.

Friday's highlight was a new duet by the American choreographer Mark Morris, performed by Baker and Toronto Dance Theatre's Christopher House. *A Beautiful Day* is danced to a sedate-but-hopeful cantata (attributed to either J.S. Bach or G.M. Hoffman) that is a delightful contrast to the quirky, comic choreography. The dancers resemble gangly adolescents dressed identically in grey one-piece suits that look as if they're intended as cycling gear. And they move like adolescents. Their pas de deux is sweet, serious, awkward—even clumsy, at times—and very touching. Instead of wrapping Baker in his arms, House gets her twisted up and ends up wrapping her in her own arms. But they remain straight-faced and serious, as if that is what they meant to do.

Like adolescents, they attempt to imitate their elders—in this case ballet's romantic duets. But this has all the awkwardness of first love: their heads are tilted, their legs are bent, and, in the all-important romantic embraces, they end up facing away from one another. They're both terribly self-conscious and, simultaneously, charmingly unaware of the ingenuous picture they present. While they're subtly comic, you have less the urge to laugh at them than to smile in recognition.

The rest of the evening was devoted to Baker's compelling solo work. In person, Baker is a slim woman of average height; on stage she's a muscular Amazon with large, expressive hands and beautiful, articulate feet

that she uses to great advantage in Molissa Fenley's *Inner Enchantments*. Her hands twist and ripple through space, as if she's dappling them in water, and in some sections she has the slow-motion grace of someone dancing in the ocean. In other sections she becomes a child skipping around the stage. While there's a lot of variety in the movement, the piece is danced to a tedious (and seemingly endless) piece by Philip Glass called *Music in Twelve Parts, Part 1* that would have had the audience's eyes glazing over if it weren't for Baker's ability to keep pulling our concentration back to the stage.

Baker is so gifted a performer that she overcomes even a clumsy piece like Annabelle Gamson's *Accident*. The movement is a literal interpretation of the title: Baker is the embodiment of pain. She shudders, she's spastic, her limbs twist in agony, and—despite the lack of subtlety in the choreography—she's fascinating to watch.

But she's at her best in her own *Sanctum*, which has the intensity of a prayer: it's simple and powerful. She stands inside a handful of sticks that are laid out in the shape of a box. She gradually picks up the sticks and holds them up in a kind of offering, then bangs them on the floor in time to rhythms created by percussionist Ahmed Hassan. There's nothing spectacular about her movements in this piece—or most of her pieces, for that matter. It's the *quality* with which she moves that makes her work wonderful.

The same could be said of her *Brahms Waltzes*, in which she dances with every part of her being. Dressed in a full-length skirt, she seems to float about the stage. While there is none of the gymnastic movement that people tend to associate with dance, each extension of her arms or gesture with her hands is fluid, detailed, and almost painfully beautiful. When she finishes, you can't help but mourn for the ephemeral nature of dance. It's sad that there's no way to preserve the exquisite image of humanity that Baker's art shows us. ■