

# DANCE INTERNATIONAL

She's a chaste school girl, she's an Amazon, she's big and raw and bony, and she's as precise and deliberate and contained as a stopwatch. I hope it goes without saying that she is beautiful. She's committed to portraying through dance "an image of humanity that's not so narrow, that doesn't leave out so many people, so many aspirations and so many difficulties". She is, she could only be, **Peggy Baker**, who brought a programme of recent (1989-1993) solos and duets to the Vancouver East Cultural Centre May 5-8.

Baker made her debut as a solo artist just three years ago, but she brought to her choreographic craft years of study with Toronto Dance Theatre, the Martha Graham School, and more than a decade of company dancing with Dancemakers, Lar Lubovitch and, most recently, the White Oak Dance Project. She currently is contemporary artist in residence at the National Ballet School. The teaching is part of the quest for her own dance voice: she says it is "a way of getting back to my essential beliefs and values about dance."

Four of the five pieces on the programme were by Baker herself. It wasn't that Doug Varone's *The Volpe Sisters* (which she performed with Janie Brendel), a study in silence of two women joined by blood and breath, was uninteresting: it just didn't belong here. It intruded upon an evening-long dance statement that was otherwise intensely singular.

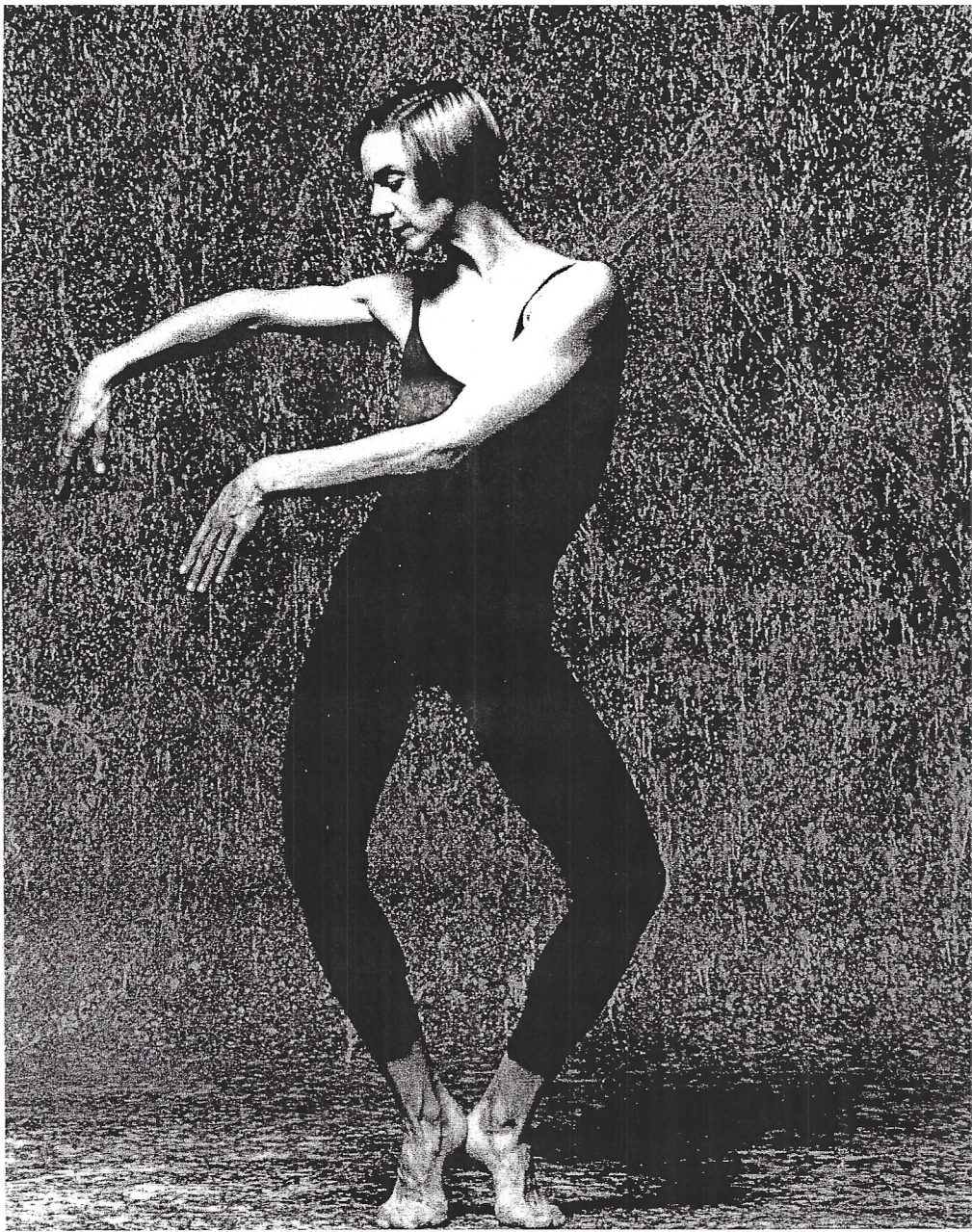
I was particularly enchanted by two works danced to the fine accompaniment of pianist Andrew Burashko: *Brahms Waltzes* and *Three Intermezzi*. The first is her tribute to Isadora Duncan (and, obliquely, to Annabelle Gamson, who has done so much to restore and present Duncan's dances right into the 1990s); the second is her own very modern, very personal exploration of Brahms, which nonetheless uses the impressionism of Duncan as a starting point.

In *Brahms Waltzes* Baker creates a quietly ecstatic place. she blurs shapes, then freezes them into stillness, she wades in and out of that swelling music, dipping and swaying and

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Peggy Baker  
Photo: Cylla von Tiedemann

giving in to it. Amidst all this her large, articulate hands and feet are paramount. I was struck again and again by the long straightness of her fingers, bent perpendicular to her wrists, and the way they contrasted with her body curves, and the way too she rocked on the soles of her feet, made the placing of a deeply arched foot an event (water could run under her instep when that foot is flat on the floor).

As the piece draws to its conclusion it seems to gather in more and more of the music's original interpreter (the piano selections are some of those used by Isadora herself). Baker is tremulous, covering her heart with her hands, and she ends with her open arms widening, her head lifting and lifting out of her breastbone. It's as though the Duncan legacy is being passed along through time, through another, very different (but no less absolutely herself) female dancing body.

*Three Intermezzi* goes one step further. The

dances are intercut with musical selections during which we listen only, which somehow has the effect of making us look harder and better at the dancing when it comes (maybe because we've been listening more attentively, too). It's as if she's asking: do you hear this the way I do? In this piece, and throughout the evening, Baker wears costumes which can only be described as ravishing, dresses and tunics in colours like ochre and aubergine and a silvery mauve there isn't even a name for. The hues, the fabrics, the cut and drape of these gowns tell me Baker knows her own body from the inside out; watching her you want to go home and put on, not *that* dress, but a dress that reveals/conceals who you really are in just the same way. (She is the embodiment of Martha Graham's counsel to "never wear a dress you can't top".)

The second half of the programme featured, in addition to the Varone piece, two

laborator Ahmed Hassan. *Sanctum* has become something of a signature piece for her. I had previously seen it at greater distance in a larger house, and I thought it lost something close up in the intimacy of the VECC. It is a piece about private spaces, chosen and imposed, she enclosed by a rectangle of light and a bordering of sticks, Hassan unmoving on a piece of carpeting, surrounded by gourds and blowers, shakers and rattles. Somehow getting a bit further away from this piece made its intentions clearer. But there is still that wonderful moment when his sticks whiz through the air, cut it into sound, as she gathers her sticks bunch by bunch, raises them, then dashes them to the floor in a hurricane, which releases a torrent of sound (he gives life to a round-bellied gourd) and movement, but located in her upper body and arms only; her legs stay rooted down, as connected to earth as he is, cross-legged on his mat.

Baker's *Geometry of the Circle* is her newest work (it premiered in March of this year in Quebec City), and again it explores the confinement of space, Hassan here in his wheelchair (he has multiple sclerosis), Baker on her feet. They take turns leading: now she is navigating the periphery of the circle, he is chasing her, now he is swiping at the air and filling it with mixed notes, she mirroring him with her whole body. Sometimes their union is symbiotic and completing, such as when she ushers the sound he makes into silence through the simple act of closing her arms into first position. The piece ends with an image you can't forget: she balancing on the foot rest of his chair, within the circle of his world, his being, he speaking to her in breath sounds: here is what it's like inside. It is intimate and encoded, at once as private and as public as you can get.

Deborah Meyers