

Dancer Baker in a class of her own

Peggy Baker and Andrew Burashko

National Gallery Auditorium, 2 p.m. through Saturday

By Pauline Tam
Citizen staff writer

It is always an uplifting experience to observe Peggy Baker in motion.

Regardless of what she does, the Toronto-based dancer, choreographer, and teacher always makes you want to drink in her every gesture and have them in your hand to hold.

She manages not only to fill every inch of space around her with a luminous presence, but also to make that space uniquely her own with no waste or lack of purpose.

Blessed with a towering, amazon frame which can at once unleash torrents of power, eloquence, and fragility in one continuous motion, Baker — who is commemorating two decades as a professional performer this year — has almost no equal in Canada among modern dancers today.

The two solos she brought to the National Gallery Auditorium Friday, in a recital with pianist Andrew Burashko, were both her own creations, after having spent the last few years performing works created for her by choreographers such as Mark Morris.

Her *Heart* was a touching four-part work danced to short selections from Brahms. Dedicated to Baker's mother, the piece contains a movement language full of generous arcs and calligraphic scrolls,

which Baker carved with resolute conviction and gorgeous grace.

The piece is divided into short scenes depicting four temperaments, with

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costume changes at the end of each one reflecting the progression.

The only interruption to her artistry was the inconsistent flow of the choreography, which sometimes had the look of a phrase unfinished. The

conclusions of each scene, in particular, had very little sense of closure to them.

Baker exudes a formal lyricism, reserve, and quiet dignity in the first scene, moving in a matronly blue velvet gown. There is a repeated phrase which begins with her arms and one leg lifted, as if poised to undertake a task.

In the second scene, some of that restraint is gone as she depicts a figure in a short-sleeved gown, moving as though confronting trials in which she must remain steadfast.

Here, she is a pillar of endurance and will, which comes builds to a forceful expressivity in the third part, as she emerges in a loose-fitting two-piece gown.

In the final act, she has once again returned to a state of grace and knowing, as expressed by her lithe movements. The sense of rec-



Peggy Baker danced two of her creations

conciliation is also reflected in the final costume change: a draping, silvery, Grecian gown, which provided a marked contrast from the sombre-colored attire of the previous three scenes.

As suggested by the title, *Brute* is a work laced with dark and foreboding meanings. Inspired by images from Picasso's preparatory sketches for *Guernica*, the piece is Baker's most recent creation, having just had its world premiere in Vancouver two months ago.

That theme is echoed by Baker's choice of costume — a black and

white body stocking with motifs from *Guernica* — as well as her movement executed with an imperious bearing.

She launches aggressive and angular lines of attack, invading large blocks of space in anguished thrusts with her arms and legs. Other times she twists about in torment, as Burashko rumbles through Prokofiev's *Sonata No. 6 in A Major*.

In the end, the combination of Baker and Burashko prove to be a sublime partnership of dynamic expressivity and remarkable grace.