

Formal Severity and Force, With Feminine Allure

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

Peggy Baker, who is performing at the Kitchen in Manhattan through tomorrow night with Andrew Burashko, a pianist and fellow Canadian, is a dancer of startling power and fascination.

Audiences lost no time noticing her in Lar Lubovitch's modern dance company, where from 1981 to 1988 her big-boned dynamism was used with passionate sweep. Appearing since then as a charter member of Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project and as a soloist, she has evolved into a dancer of striking physical projection.

Now in her own choreography, she knows how to focus on her expressive back and amazing long arms, fingers and legs; no one else dances with the same striking mix of formal severity, muscular force and strangely feminine allure.

The two United States premieres she presented on Thursday night at the Kitchen are collaborations with Mr. Burashko and are ostensibly inspired by two icons of modern art, Kandinsky and Picasso.

Whatever the pretext, and it is not always sustained successfully, the point is that no one can plunge into space and describe cursive shapes with Ms. Baker's eye-riveting intensity, even eccentricity. Here, indeed, the dancer cannot be separated from the dance.

In her first piece, "Black Border With Moving Figures," Ms. Baker wears a costume by Caroline O'Brien in which the patterns are derived

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from Kandinsky's paintings. In "Brute," Picasso's "Guernica" is recalled in Miss O'Brien's black-and-white designs (a Cubist horse is painted on Ms. Baker's back). Yet both pieces are actually about the tension and harmony between Ms. Baker and Mr. Burashko; they are serious and high-level collaborators.

It is the piano that holds center stage, and while Ms. Baker exits sporadically to render her Kandinsky leotard and little pleated skirt more asymmetrical by adding one pants leg to half a skirt or temporarily donning a print overblouse, Mr. Burashko is always at his piano. The music he plays with fervor and refinement on a possibly inadequate and not quite grand piano is Romantic. The first part consists of Liszt's "Petrarch Sonnets," Nos. 47, 104 and 123, while three Chopin pieces accompany the last half.

To say that Mr. Burashko is the Romantic while Ms. Baker is as abstract as her leotard is too simple. Whether Kandinsky is also truly abstract is a subject of debate, and his search for a spiritual dimension seems to be alluded to in Ms. Baker's fleeting cruciform poses.

Much of her work is in pure form:

her elongated scooping arms, her deadpan austerity as she repeatedly curves her back in turns with knee raised and the stillness she projects against Mr. Burashko's turbulence in the well-known 104th sonnet. But she also has a strongly emotional expressionist streak. It is true that her choreography's underpinnings are strongly structured. Like many modern dancers, she choreographed the piece in silence, then fit it to the music. When the Chopin begins, much of the first dance to Liszt is repeated but in a different musical context. The overlapping designs Ms. Baker creates with her body are seen in a new way and in a different light by a fine designer, Marc Parent.

Ms. Baker seems less interested in cerebral games than in the shape and dynamics of her personal movement style. In "Brute," her twisted

body reclines, tries to rise and explodes in the air with the first burst of Prokofiev's Sonata No. 6 in A (Op. 82). The entire work is an exercise in dislocated forms. It may be unfair to ask why Ms. Baker is not dancing about Bosnia instead of using images from a mural about the Spanish Civil War. Yet her choreography has the feeling of an esthetic response, inspired by a painting more than the experience behind it.

Ms. Baker's sincerity is never in doubt, and if her clawing, despairing protagonist is at odds with the music at times, her outpouring of energy is admirable. Before "Brute," Mr. Burashko, taking off his jacket to show his avant-garde side, played John Cage's "Music for Piano No. 2" in a turtleneck. The musical interlude had some possibly unintentional charm and was imbued with resonant clarity.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Peggy Baker in "Brute," the second of her premieres at the Kitchen.