

# This irresistible force cannot be upstaged

## DANCE REVIEW

### Peggy Baker Dance Projects

Premiere Dance Theatre,  
Harbourfront Centre, Toronto

BY MICHAEL CRABB

Some dancers fade away. Others keep getting better. Peggy Baker falls emphatically in the latter camp.

It is common for truly gifted modern dancers to perform well into middle age, relying on artistic experience and even the nostalgic yearnings of their fans to keep them going, but Baker, at age 46, needs no concessions or indulgences from her audience. She remains the genuine article, a radiant dancer of exceptional physical and emotional power who can express more in a single gesture than dancers half her age can hope to accomplish in a whole evening's performance.

Peggy Baker's latest program at Toronto's Premiere Dance Theatre lasts less than 90 minutes, including intermission, yet it is so rich

and intense that you leave feeling at once exhilarated and emotionally drained. She possesses that irresistible force called stage presence. Baker's long limbs carve through space with a sense of purpose that is riveting to watch.

Until 1990, Baker was a company dancer, a founding member of Toronto's Dancemakers, later a luminous presence within the acclaimed New York-based Lar Lubovitch Dance Company and, after that, a charter member of Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project. In 1990, she returned to Toronto and launched her current career as a teacher and solo performer.

In fact, Baker has rarely been a soloist in the traditional sense, simply picking music and using it to support an egocentric exhibition of her own prodigious dancing talent. Much of her work has been collaborative. Her current program exemplifies this, involving such guest artists as Toronto's Amici chamber ensemble, the composer/percussionist Debashis Sinha, and dancer Doug Varone, a former partner from

her days with Lar Lubovitch.

And when she chooses collaborators, Baker selects the very best, even at the risk of having herself upstaged, which almost happens in *Sylvan Quartet*, a choreography created by Baker for Amici last year to a dazzling score, *I Think That I Shall Never See . . .*, by Toronto composer Chan Ka Nin, originally commissioned by the CBC in 1993.

David Hetherington (cello), Joaquin Valdepeñas (clarinet), and Patricia Parr (piano) are not mere accompanists in *Sylvan Quartet*. Their physical energy is as much an integral part of the work's choreographic fabric as their music making. Baker, however, is the visual animator of Chan Ka Nin's richly textured score. Lynne Steincamp's autumnal-coloured costume for Baker, a palette echoed in the musicians' everyday clothes, together with lighting designer Marc Parent's dappled pattern projected onto the cyclorama, complement the woodland theme suggested by the work's title.

Baker herself moves through the piece almost like a spirit of the forest, sometimes frolicsome, sometimes approaching centre stage on a diagonal from the corner like a determined interloper on someone else's picnic.

The program's opening work, *Sanctum*, is a revival from 1991.

Originally Baker shared the stage with the work's composer, her husband Ahmed Hassan, now disabled with MS. Now, Baker's collaborator is Debashis Sinha. He sits cross-legged almost centre-stage on a Persian rug, surrounded by various blown, rattled, and beaten instruments. Baker is set to one side, initially confined within a rectangle delineated by wooden rods that she ultimately scatters in Sanctum's dramatic closing moments. Before this happens, Baker engages in an intimate, yet distanced dialogue with Sinha as he provides the musical accompaniment.

The sounds of Sinha's simple instruments and Baker's own angular poses and invocatory gestures, often performed in profile, lend *Sanctum* a ritualistic tone, yet there is also a subtle emotional drama going on. As the lights dim, Sinha echoes Baker's arm movements, as if both are reaching for some unattainable communication. When Baker finally breaks loose from her confining rectangle against a blazing burst of red light, it's as much a gesture of frustration as spiritual resignation.

In *Thine Eyes*, the Doug Varone duet from 1996 that closes the program, is also about the difficult quest for human connection and the spiritual incompleteness of its achievement. Varone, who founded his own dance troupe 13 years ago, has set *In Thine Eyes* to selections from British composer Michael Nyman's *Noises, Sounds and Sweet Airs*. It could generically be categorized as minimalist music except that Nyman's vocal setting for three voices of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, with its unexpected bursts of melody and dynamic changes, gives the score a far deeper emotional range than one expects from the minimalists.

Varone's response is startling and original, a courting ritual choreographed in staccato movement, performed within the sinister void evoked by David Ferri's lighting. Varone's character struggles to break down Baker's ambivalent response to his awkward approaches, yet it is clear her yearning is as



Riveting to watch: Peggy Baker Dance Projects.

great as his. Even when you think she has finally submitted and melted into Varone's embrace, Baker's upward turned gaze suggests the impossibility of trying to find spiritual oneness in carnal connection.

This is dance at its very best, performed by two consummate artists, using the language of

movement to trigger an emotional recognition that words could never achieve. Any true dance lover would be a fool to miss it.

■ Performances until Saturday. Tickets: (416) 973-4000.

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