

The view from here is mesmerizing

DANCE REVIEW

Peggy Baker: Interior View
Betty Oliphant Theatre

BY MICHAEL CRABB

There are three compelling reasons why dance-lovers should see *Interior View*, Peggy Baker's latest solo show at Toronto's Betty Oliphant Theatre. First, there's Baker's own mesmerizing dancing; second, there's Andrew Burashko's alert and expressive piano accompaniment; third, there's the clever seating configuration that flips the conventional audience-performer relationship and puts people right on stage, eyeball to eyeball with the artists.

On the first point it should hardly be necessary to reiterate the features that have made the internationally acclaimed Baker one of the finest dancers on stage anywhere today. Traditionally, modern dancers have tended to perform later in life than ballet dancers. The fact that Baker is 48 and still performing is not so remarkable. What is extraordinary is the degree to which Baker has retained so much physical power and athletic capacity while enriching her performance with a lifetime of human experience and artistic insight.

The jury is still out on whether Baker's choreography is as good as her dancing. All but one of the five items on her current 75-minute program are her own. One can certainly observe a repetition of movement preferences: poses, arm gestures, coiling turns, percussive bursts and tranquil punctuation points. This is typical of solo dancers/choreographers, and Baker's hallmarks are always modulated in subtle ways that make them fresh and interesting. In truth, with great solo performers it is almost impossible to view the choreography apart from the

dancer, and in Baker's case the two are so intimately connected it is hard to imagine anyone else dancing her work and achieving even a small proportion of its impact.

Unfold, Baker's latest creation, given its Canadian premiere at last Thursday's opening, is a good example. Set to Alexander Scriabin's Preludes Op. 11 and with a few strategic pauses added, it's a very long solo, almost 30 minutes. Baker wisely develops it in almost episodic fashion, as if she has found resonances in the music that have personal emotional significance.

It goes beyond simple music visualization. Sometimes she is bounding around the stage, joyfully gobbling up space. At other moments, the movement is tightly coiled. Her mood becomes darker; more introverted. Occasionally she makes modifications to her layered costume. The jacket comes off, then later the gauzy skirt. Left in close-fitting pants and top, the precision and sharpness of her movement become even clearer.

As for Burashko's playing, it would be

fairer to describe him as Baker's partner rather than as her accompanist. As in past Baker performances, Burashko is right there on stage with her. The two pianos, one distantly positioned from the audience on an elevated orchestra pit, are almost part of the decor and make the music far more than an aural backdrop. Baker works it well. Occasionally she will run to the piano as if drawn magnetically. In the closing piece, furthermore, she never strays far and ends by wrapping her arms around Burashko, acknowledging his important contribution.

In explaining her decision to seat the audience in two rows at the back of the stage, Baker had earlier told me she hoped to give people the excitement she herself feels watching dancers in a studio setting. She's gone way beyond that.

The audience is led almost ceremoniously from the lobby, up and across the theatre balcony, along the side boxes and thence to the stage. Drifts of smoke hang in the air, cut through by brilliant spotlight beams. A scrim, dappled with light, initially bisects the stage. The atmosphere is potently theatrical. As the evening progresses, Marc Parent's light-

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ing plays variations on the cavernous form and architectural detail of the empty theatre, turning it into an elaborate set. At one point in *Unfold*, Baker purposefully turns her back on the audience, projecting her movement toward the empty house. We see the rippling of her sweat-glistened shoulder muscles and get a sudden sense of her vulnerability,

out there alone. Most of the time, however, she faces the audience, allowing us to see even more of the intensity and focus that fuels her dancing. For the series of four short solos that complement *Unfold*, Baker has the front curtain lowered, creating much more the atmosphere of a studio.

There are drawbacks to this unusual seating placement. As Baker moves across the stage, people sitting on the opposite side have to crane their necks. When Burashko, standing stage left, reads something by American composer John Cage, the words are mostly lost to those sitting far to stage right.

I don't imagine Baker intends to make this configuration a habit for future performances, but for those fortunate enough to experience *Interior View* it certainly provides an intriguing and informative perspective.

■ Peggy Baker's *Interior View* plays the Betty Oliphant Theatre, 404 Jarvis St. Nov. 14-18 at 8:30 p.m. and Nov. 19 at 4 p.m. Tickets: (416) 504-7529.

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Peggy Baker performs *Unfold*, one of five pieces from her solo show *Interior View*.