

Dance Review

Peggy Baker speaks in limbs

By Thea Singer
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Solo artist Peggy Baker is drawn to the spaces between things: between musical notes, between people, between how things are and how things appear. Often the subjects of her exquisitely articulate dances reside in the synapses across which nerve-impulses-as-emotions fire.

In this show, she performed three works she'd choreographed and an excerpt from a longer collaborative piece. The performance was a reminder of the innate capacity of movement to make the internal visible.

Baker is big-boned, with long sinewy limbs, and her giant, reaching hands and feet are so strong they have almost a gnarled quality; every knuckle and joint is pulled into action.

"A True Story" (1996) tells the tale, in movement and spare, indelible words, of a blended family: A woman of 38 marries a man with a daughter of 13. The girl vows to take the woman not just as "her father's wife" but also as "her mother."

Baker, as the bride, struggles with what she wants the girl to call her, casting off "Stepmother" with a stamp of her impressive foot but not quite wearing "Mom" comfortably, either. In the end she witnesses a baby who, intimately familiar with his mother's female form, mistakes a naked woman in a bath for his mother. When his mother corrects him — "'No,' laughed his mother, 'she's a woman,'" — the baby unwittingly solves the new bride's dilemma.

"Wooona," the baby declares, reaching up his arms to the bather. The bride contemplates her choices: Mom, Mother, Stepmother. "And then she put down the names," intones Baker, "and chose Wooona instead."

It's enough that Baker may have invented the perfect name for any woman caught in the maelstrom of a blended family. But she's also invented a movement vocabulary that makes ropy, nearly indescribable emotions kinesthetically resonant.

As she performs, the entire

length of her prodigious body engages in a kind of sign language. A gesture that plants a thumb on a cheek to indicate "woman" originates deep in her toes and travels, like blood through arteries, up to her small, refined face. The dance is simultaneously a gift and a responsibility: It teaches us the true meaning of the word "parent" and dares us to be one.

Both "Strand" (1997), to music by Ann Southam, and "Furthermore" (1998), to music by John Cage, are less solos than duets for Baker and pianist Marc Ryser, whose instrument sits center stage.

In fact, on one level "Strand" is about an even more elusive relationship: the one between the notes that spring from a piano's keys and the movements that spring from a dancer's body. Baker's movements — a hand hanging like a noose, muscled arms embracing massive spheres of space — jump between the discordant notes, instigate them, or stop them cold as they crash together into a chord.

"Furthermore," in contrast, is a Cunningham-esque exploration of the distance between silence and

sound and between acting and being acted upon.

Here the two artists' rhythms, cadences, tones, and actual bodies play off one another. Baker's long thighs open into a fourth-position plie as her hand reaches over the keys as if to still them. Ryser pounds the keys and also plucks the strings inside the piano, sometimes putting Baker in the position of marionette: He's controlling her with his strings.

Summer Stages Dance

Choreographer: Peggy Baker
At: Concord Academy, Concord,
Thursday night

Alternatively, Baker's movements — say, a knee shooting toward an elbow and down — dictate his playing, or the two merge, a fusion of gesture and timbre. When Baker, at the end, holds Ryser fully from behind, the curved backs of the pair represent a uniting of souls.



PHOTO/LOIS GREENFIELD

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