

Toronto's Baker dances in Quebecer's dark night

Loin, Très Loin an anguished, swirling exploration of love and history

By MICHAEL SCOTT

Life begins to lose its cheer for many people in middle age. The body creaks and wheedles, zeal gives way to pragmatism, ardor cools. The horizon, once starry and promising, turns heavy and portentous. Even happy memories have a way of turning more bitter than sweet.

Paul-André Fortier, who is one of Quebec's most formidable dance makers, must be peering at the passing years through a particularly dark glass. *Loin, Très Loin*, an extended solo that he made last year for Toronto dancer Peggy Baker is as somber and lugubrious as a funeral cortege.

The title, which translates as Far, Very Far, suggests some of the world weariness that lies so heavy at the heart of the piece. Like an existentialist play from the 1950s, *Loin, Très Loin* sets us down in the midst of a dark and interminable journey, plodding toward oblivion. Baker, who gave the work its West Coast premiere on Wednesday night, is a performer of considerable force. Gaunt and glowering, she evokes the ennui and psychic fatigue that Fortier is attempting to describe: a Beckett character flipping coins in a featureless plain.

It would be impossible to overstate the gravitas of this work, which is danced through pools of often dim light on an otherwise dark stage. The revolutionary ethos of Fortier's own early years — the promise of Quebec's Quiet Revolution, the rise of Quebecois nationalism, the turmoil of the 1980s are summoned forth here by the acid guitar solos of Gaetan LeBoeuf's original score. Baker's first appearance, in light so dim that her movements blur into indistinctness, has the deep meditative quality of a person dancing alone to the memory of music. LeBoeuf's virtuosic '70s-style rifts only add to the sense of Baker being some superannuated groupie, communing with the past.

As the full force of the work comes on, Baker wheels and runs around the edges of the space, describing large figures-of-eight, with ashen-faced determination. Repeatedly she turns to face the audience, and in silence places her palms on various body parts, pivoting them open like so many Advent calendar doors. In the context of the work they might be battle scars she shows us, or the wounds of love.

At other times she flails at the empty air around her, wielding forearms like machetes and accompan-

ing herself with slicing intakes of breath. The choreography speaks of containment and release, Baker launching herself into the darkness with the same weariness you see on the faces of war zone refugees.

She dances through a series of lighted rectangles, offering views of some distant and discordant past. Once the six images are completed she flies back across the stage, flailing and chopping at the empty light as if to erase the last vestiges of her earlier work.

Loin, Très Loin is a strange nocturne of a dance in which Baker never once, not even in the aftermath of her curtain calls softens her grave, fatigued expression. At times, as she twines her limbs and exhales percussive breaths, she invokes the memory of another Quebec dance maker, Marie Chouinard, who fills her stages with fire-breathing, loin-rubbing aliens. In Baker's case, her character is less otherworldly, but just as driven to search for meaning in the dark.

In the end, after an hour of summoning up the shades of memories, Baker slumps over in a fading light, the silence reverberating on one awkwardly, tragically extended arm.

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Peggy Baker gives a singular performance in Paul-André Fortier's *Loin, Très Loin*.