

Healing time's wounds with dance

DANCE

loin, très loin

Peggy Baker Dance Projects
choreography by Paul-André Fortier
Firehall Arts Centre
in Vancouver on Wednesday

REVIEWED BY SHANNON RUPP

When Peggy Baker finished dancing *loin, très loin* (far, very far), and the lights dimmed, the audience in Vancouver's Firehall Arts Centre was silent. Perhaps it was awe? Baker's dancing always invites raves. Or maybe it was the poignancy of watching a performer who is nearing the end of her career dance a journey that parallels her own experience. *Loin, très loin* does have a bittersweet quality. And there is always a faint sense of loss that comes with watching great dance, because you know you may never see this artist perform this way again.

Whatever the reason, we sat dumbstruck in the dark for a while before someone realized a performance of such overwhelming beauty deserved applause. Many artists talk about art's ability to give audiences feelings of ecstasy, but few actually deliver on that promise. Baker does.

Although it's hard to believe, the lean, sinewy woman with a rare ability to carve out the space as she dances, is 49. While Baker appears as strong as ever — if anything she moves with more power — common sense says she can't have much stage time left.

So the image of this lone dancer in shadowy light, struggling, defying the laws of gravity, and eventually being forced to the ground, is especially moving.

The score by Gaetan LeBoeuf is a raucous electric guitar piece that owes more than a nod to Jimi Hendrix. But some moments are danced in silence, with Baker making whooshing noises as her hands slice the air. Sometimes they are aggressive karate chops, designed to challenge all comers. At other times, her cutting motions look like she is bushwhacking her way

through the undergrowth. Sometimes, the only sound to be heard is Baker panting wildly with both fear and exhaustion.

But not all of her dance journey is a struggle. Montreal's Paul-André Fortier choreographed this piece, and his work is always full of subtleties and nuances. When Baker whirls, her diaphanous skirt floats around her, and she seems to take flight. But she also revels in being earthbound. At one point she stretches her long, muscular arms wide and tilts, until her right hand touches the floor, which seems to send a shot of electricity through her and cause her left hand to spasm with excitement.

Some of her gestures offer glimpses of transcendent beauty. Repeatedly, she lifts one knee and appears to lean on it as if it is something solid and apart from her body. Suddenly that knee gives way, and her leg stretches behind her in a gentle lunge. Who knows why this combination is so exquisite? Perhaps it's because she moves with such precision and control that it implies perfection. Whatever the reason, it's breathtaking every time she does it.

Baker's gift is in the clarity of her movements. At one point, she stands centre stage, facing the audience, and places her hands first on one side of her abdomen, then the other and you can feel an ache. Then she places a hand over her heart and, as she peels it away from her chest, it suggests an open wound. Her hands then open and close over her body, revealing wounds and healing them, not a bad image of what artists do.

As the piece closes, there are gestures of farewell: Baker touches a hand to her chest and then extends her arm like a ballerina about to curtsy. She ends sitting on the stage, legs stretched out in front of her — not quite defeated, but no longer strong enough to stand.

Peggy Baker dances at the Firehall Arts Centre in Vancouver through tonight. She will perform loin, très loin at Toronto's Danceworks, Nov. 15-17.

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