

Review

Masterful Baker merges body, mind



William Littler

Indian classical dancers routinely continue performing into their 70s and so, for that matter, did the great Martha Graham. So to have found the 50-year-old Peggy Baker dancing this week at the Betty Oliphant Theatre (the final performance takes place this afternoon at 4) scarcely invites mention in the Guinness Book of World Records.

Even so, it isn't often that one sees dancing of this calibre, so completely achieving what it set out to do, regardless of the age of the performer.

Like Mikhail Baryshnikov, with whose White Oak Project she appeared in its inaugural season, Baker never does what she cannot do well. Every body has its limits and she knows hers.

She also knows that dancing, at its best, isn't about showing off. It is about communicating meaning. And that requires powers of intellect and emotion by no means always found in young dancers, eager to leap and spin.

The tragedy of ballet, it has sometimes been said, is that by the time many dancers reach their intellectual and emotional maturity, their bodies have begun to lose their kinetic powers.

This is largely a matter of vocabulary. The athleticism demanded by the language of classical ballet makes it a young person's game.

Baker, however, is a modern dancer, working in a tradition and with a vocabulary that uses the body differently.

She opened her program with its most overtly physical work, *Person Project*,



Modern dancer Peggy Baker performs with cellist Shauna Rolson.

set on her by Tere O'Connor back in 1991 after she had left the Lar Lubovitch company in New York.

The Edmonton-born dancer was at the beginning of her solo career at the time and a work suggestive of life's passage could hardly have been more appropriate.

Dressed in a red velvet cocktail dress, she twisted her way toward the front of the bare stage, surveyed her domain and proceeded to inhabit it with short sequences of high steps, small steps, forward movement, backward movement, hops, strides, arm stretches and a variety of poses, all in silence.

The silence challenged her powers of concentration and focus, but as her viewers soon learned, this was a dancer who could invest a single bend or extension of the arms with a sense of importance. Not for a moment did she break her flow of concentration or lose her body control.

This was dancing from a quiet centre and it had a wonderfully quieting effect on the audience as well. One could have heard in that crowded theatre the proverbial pin drop.

Music by Dick Cannette and a couple of chairs joined the proceedings in the next piece, *Home*, a portrait of a middle-aged couple, set back in 1988 by New Yorker Doug Varone and performed on this occasion (for the first time in Canada) with James Kudelka, artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada, a sometime ballet dancer

seldom to be seen any longer on stage.

The repetitively minimalist music played by a live string quartet sounded a little like watered down Aaron Copland in its lyrical and elegiac character but it provided an ideal Americana sound against which the two figures exhibited their changing feelings, as often with stillness as with movement.

The piece is more about the emotional than the physical geography of life and much of the time they sat in or stood by their chairs making small gestures of connectedness and rupture.

If the secret of acting is being, it is a secret shared by dancing in a piece like this. And Baker and Kudelka looked as real as real could be.

Back dancing on her own in the final piece, *The Transparent Recital*, choreographed specially for this program by her erstwhile York University classmate Tedd Robinson, Baker shared the stage this time with one of Canada's finest cellists, Shauna Rolson, with whom she moved from chair to chair during its course.

Rolson played Bach, mostly, with touches of John Oswald, on a full-sized as well as a child-sized instrument, and Baker carried a suitcase part of the time, which turned out to be a wind-up phonograph. As is so often the case with Tedd Robinson's work, the ghost of René Magritte and his fellow surrealists seemed to be lurking in the background.

Although Baker specializes in serious work, dancing Robinson almost inevitably involves breaking out in manic spurts of movement from time to time. Even her derriere and fingers wound up dancing this time. Nothing fazed her.

Throughout the slightly more than an hour-long program, it was interesting to observe how moments of stillness were incorporated in all three works as they have to be to enable a solo dancer to sustain an evening of dance.

What made them interesting was their unobtrusiveness. There was no panting and puffing along the way. Such was Peggy Baker's power of concentration that the dancing never really seemed to stop.

She demonstrated, as she danced, that as in the rests of a musical score, the quiet moments in a sequence of dancing are integral, not interruptive, when a real artist is at work.