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Reviews & Responses

Peggy Baker's "Home" Season

"Home" presented by Peggy Baker Dance Projects

by Kathleen M. Smith

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Peggy Baker's "Home" Season

If home is where the heart is, dancer/choreographer Peggy Baker's domestic turf must surely encompass the entire planet - Baker can wear her heart on her sleeve like no other performer. The evening-length "Home" is a collection of three brief works, two of them made specifically for the incomparable Baker, one of them performed as if it was. They all ponder the question - where, what, who is home? And in very different ways, they all confirm Baker's status as an artist of humanity, generosity and rigour.

"Person Project" was made for Baker in 1991 by New York's Tere O'Connor. It's a spare solo danced in silence that showcases Baker's famously attenuated physique. In a red dress, against a yellow backdrop, Baker distills O'Connor's idiomatic movement, poses and gestures into a dance that expresses seamlessly both interior and exterior landscapes. Now an elegant heron, now a fussing Coppelia, now a



Peggy Baker and Shauna Rolston in Tedd Robinson's "The Transparent Recital" / photo by Cylla von Tiedemann

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mugging silent film star, Baker uses O'Connor's iconic postures to create a character yearning for something outside herself. We don't know what that is until the final moments of the piece when a lively party seems to erupt in the wings and our broken dolly stumbles on demi-point towards the sounds of merriment. As always in a Baker performance, she inhabits the moment with such focus and commitment that it's hard to look away. Typically impeccable production values protect this delicate suspension between audience and performer for the duration of the dance.

"Home" , choreographed by another New Yorker, Doug Varone, in 1988, is the thematic linchpin of the program and it is also the jewel in the crown for this evening of remarkable performances. Baker and James Kudelka (yes, that one, the artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada) unfurl a duet suffused with sorrow and tenderness. Together they perform the peculiar dance of long-term lovers: step away, step together, bump into each other, turn your back, try to re-connect, swoon, trip, push/pull. More a series of gestures that flow into each other than a dance relying on modern or any other technique, "Home" is all about sub-text and partnering, sometimes almost aggressive. Kudelka (who no longer looks like the dancer he once was) nimbly supports Baker, using his weight to keep her from fleeing, a denouement that I came to expect throughout most of the work - it's that tense. Varone's piece, painful in its accuracy, is punctuated by heart-wrenching moments - Baker "sobbing" , hands to ribcage is one - nailed perfectly by these seasoned, intelligent actor/dancers. Gilding the lily is the live rendering of Dick Connette's score by string musicians Steven Dann, Aisslinn Nosky, Carina Reeves and Julia Wedman.

In the new Tedd Robinson work, "The Transparent Recital" , Baker performs a different kind of duet, this time with acclaimed cellist Shauna Rolston. The pair negotiates a stage filled with different sized chairs and music stands. Baker hauls around a box that turns out to be an ancient gramophone. The two keep up a silent banter between phrases of music and dance that can only be described as goofy. In her topknot and burgundy tulle bustle, Baker resembles a particularly fit Olive Oyl or some other rubber-limbed cartoon character as she flashes her legs and wiggles her bottom. It's refreshing that Robinson has chosen to expose Baker's lighter side, camping things up and subverting her natural gravitas and dignity as a performer. But after the intensity and crystalline purity of "Person Project" and "Home" , this work felt messy and imprecise to me. And though it confirms

Baker's range, Robinson's signature wackiness doesn't necessarily suit a performer of her depth. Similarly, Rolston seems underused playing a pastiche of Bach, James Rolfe and John Oswald (who directed the music) and bouncing from chair to chair when we know she is routinely capable of sublime and passionate interpretations of the most difficult classical repertoire. Perhaps this is Robinson's point - "I'm going to make you see these divas in a different light, he seems to be saying, "off their pedestals are they not just as watchable?" I guess it depends on what kind of mood you're in.

Quibbles aside, the three works that comprise "Home" are mostly worthy of Baker's rare genius. Just turned fifty and with recent knee surgeries under her belt, Baker's body is an instrument that still serves her well. And her other gifts - for musicality, for emotional expression, for intelligent, committed interpretation, only get better with age. There are few performers of her calibre dancing in Canada - watching her work onstage remains a treat and a privilege.

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