

# Eloquent even when she's standing still

## DANCE REVIEW

*Peggy Baker: Home*  
Betty Oliphant Theatre

BY MICHAEL CRABB

As they say, it's not what you say; it's how you say it. The folk who study these things insist that only 25% of what we communicate through speech is conveyed by the words themselves. The rest depends on tone. The same principle applies in the language of dance, as was made redolently apparent by the acclaimed Toronto-based Peggy Baker, whose compact yet eloquent recital of three works, given four performances, closed yesterday.

Baker is one of those dancers who can command attention simply by standing still. It's not just the impact of her long-limbed, statuesque body. It's the force of Baker's intense concentration that compels attention. When she does move, probing the space around her with carefully calibrated steps and lunges or reflecting her inner emotion with economical gestures, it is with such a clear sense of intent that you immediately feel drawn into a magical world where meaning is conveyed by visual metaphors.

In *Person Project*, a work first set for Baker by U.S. choreographer Tere O'Connor in 1991, she dances in complete silence for 20 minutes. Wearing an ample, ruby-red cocktail dress, Baker follows and sometimes repeats

sequences of movement that build their own visual rhythm and catalog a succession of inner thoughts. Sometimes the movement is frolicsome. Other times it is stately and serene. When Baker rises as high on her toes as anyone possibly could in bare feet, she seems poised in unstable equilibrium. At another moment her arms mime juggling motions, as if her life has more in it than she can handle. Then, at the end, the light begins to dim and we hear party

## BAKER'S

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## GROW RICHER WITH

## EACH PASSING YEAR

chatter as Baker crosses the darkening stage toward a lighted doorway.

Baker turned 50 last fall. She doesn't look it, but the reality is that she's had both her knees rebuilt in the past couple of years and she can't work her body quite the way she used to. She paces herself carefully. Yet, by some wonderful paradox, her performances grow richer with each passing year, which no doubt explains why the National Ballet School's Betty Oliphant Theatre was packed to the rafters on Saturday night.

Baker chose to give her concert the overall title, *Home*. It was also the title of one of the works on view. The word, however, is broadly suggestive of several elements in Baker's career. She teaches modern dance at the National Ballet School and the huge stage of its training theatre has become Baker's familiar Toronto venue. Since returning to Canada after a distinguished decade in New York, performing with the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company and Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project, Baker has largely pursued a freelance solo career but has always worked collaboratively with other choreographers and musicians. They have become a part of her family and Baker invited several of them into her home for this performance.

James Kudelka, artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada, has choreographed for Baker in the past. This time, he joined Baker on stage to perform Doug Varone's dance duet, *Home*. It's a meticulously wrought portrait of a relationship that has endured so long that each partner can seemingly read each other's mind, leaving little actually to be said. Dick Connette's string quartet score, played live, underlined the situation with its repetitive, almost dirge-like chord progressions. This clearly has not always been an easy relationship; no maudlin romance. Largely through gesture, Varone portrays both the perils and pleasures of intimacy, the struggle to retain individuality, the conflicting responses to the inevitable state of interdependence.

Kudelka is three years Baker's junior and in his formal dancing days was a lithe and formidable classical ballet technician. Now, balding and plump, Kudelka

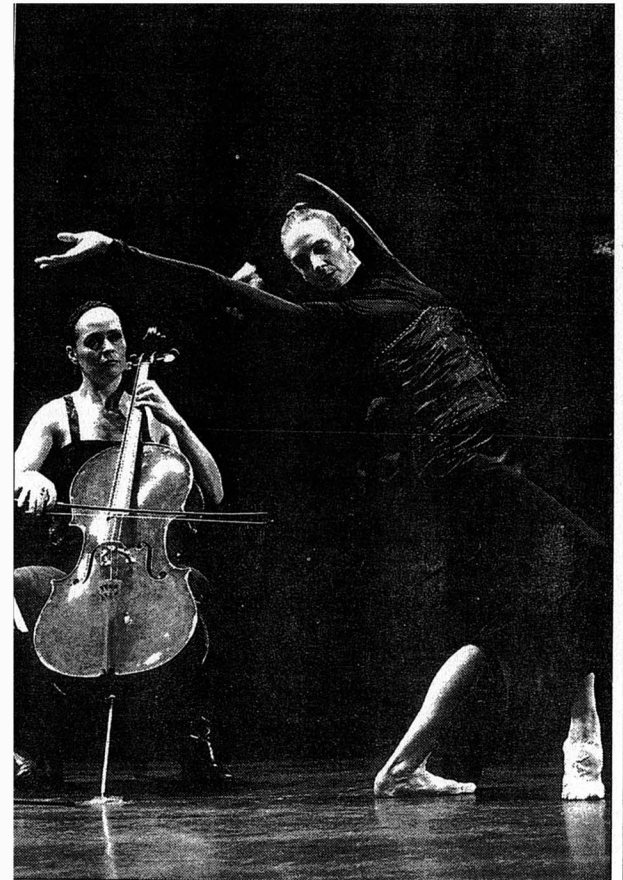
hardly ever appears on the ballet stage, even in character roles. In *Home*, however, his physical deterioration becomes an advantage. Kudelka looks so ordinary and middle-aged, the effort of his movements add a level of poignancy to his portrayal of an over-ripe relationship.

The final work, *The Transparent Recital*, was new, choreographed for Baker by the award-winning Canadian choreographer, Tedd Robinson, with a fractured score that included drifts of Bach and music by John Oswald, the Toronto composer of *Plunderphonics* fame. It was also a duet, and a marvelous one, for Baker and that incandescent Canadian cellist, Shauna Rolston.

Robinson has always had a taste for the surreal and possesses a gift rare among choreographers — wit. Both are at play in *The Transparent Recital*. Rolston, sexily dressed in tight wine-coloured velveteen pants, matching boots and top, moves from chair to chair. As Rolston plays, Baker, in a long, tight dress with a bodice that flowers into a huge bow at the rear, zooms into a variety of comical riffs, summoning up images of everything from a warrior queen to a blushing geisha.

The friendly interplay between Baker and Rolston is three-quarters of the fun and by the time the two perch precariously on tiny chairs — Rolston playing a toddler-scaled cello and Baker opening the boxed phonograph she's been carrying around — it's hard to say if the work is anything more than playful. However, with two such consummately theatrical artists at work, it hardly matters.

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CYLLA VON TIEDEMANN

Cellist Shauna Rolston and Peggy Baker in *The Transparent Recital*.