

# Trusting in the essential Baker

## DANCE

### Inside the Choreographer's Trust

Choreography by Peggy Baker  
At the Betty Oliphant Theatre  
in Toronto on Friday

REVIEWED BY REBECCA TODD

Poet William Butler Yeats wondered: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" The same question frames choreographer Peggy Baker's *Inside the Choreographer's Trust, Year One*.

At Friday night's performance at the Betty Oliphant Theatre, Baker explained that, in 12 years of performing as a solo dancer-choreographer, she has often wondered whether audiences could see the choreography underneath her dancing. As a way of answering Yeats's question for herself, she devised a three-year plan to teach six of her solos to 12 different dancers.

In the project's first year Baker has taught two solos to four dancers: *Brahms Waltzes* (1992) is danced by Kate Holden and Jessica Runge, and *In a Landscape* (1995) is performed by Tanya Howard and Chris Grider. Friday night's performance offered the opportunity to see both interpretations of each dance, performed to the accompaniment of Andrew Burashko on piano.

In this program, differences in interpretation are underlined by differences in lighting (by Marc Parent), staging and costume. Although the underlying choreographic structures are clearly present, such differences are so marked that it's hard to pinpoint where the choreography's essence lies.

In Baker's precise, musical choreography, movement themes are introduced, varied and restated as they build and evolve. In this production, such choreographic structures are intelligently established through the programming, so that the first interpretation we see of each dance emphasizes the legibility of the choreographic form.

For example, *In a Landscape*, set to music by John Cage, is initially performed by the National Ballet's Tanya Howard, who dances inside the original set — a static circle of four objects designed by Kurt Swinghammer. Tall and long-limbed, Howard establishes a vocabulary of bending, folding limbs and articulating joints, as if she were a giant insect shifting from one position to the next.

In contrast, Toronto Dance Theatre's Chris Grider performs the same dance in the middle of a spinning, galaxy-shaped projection. Where Howard draws our attention to the negative space around her, Grider focuses attention on the mass of his body; where Howard punctuates her movement with stillness, Grider seems to be constantly shifting and seething.

The differences between versions of *Brahms Waltzes*, a solo informed by the dances of Isadora Duncan, are just as marked. Kate Holden's clean interpretation emphasizes the weight shifts and arcs inherent in the swinging rhythm of the waltz, which develop into full circles, runs and turns.

For her part, Jessica Runge is a dancer who, like Duncan before her, can make the most technical movement look spontaneous. In Runge's version of *Brahms Waltzes*, the thematic principles are so fleshed out with breath, dynamism and passion that they seem to be the outward expression of some inner force driven by the music.

Baker told us that she put the word "trust" in the title for two reasons: First, she feels that these solos contain the sum of knowledge, inherited from legendary dance artists, that is her legacy to pass on.

Second, the project also involves an element of trust in the dancers themselves. In giving these solos away, Baker hopes to give them a new lease on life through evolving individual interpretations. Judging from this program, her hopes are well founded.

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