



CYLLA VON TIEDEMANN

The Disappearance of Right and Left is Peggy Baker's autobiographical dance that combines storytelling with a parallel stream of movement.

# A 51-year-old body going on 29

## DANCE REVIEW

Peggy Baker

Betty Oliphant Theatre

BY MICHAEL CRABB

Theatrical dance, because of its presumed athleticism, is often considered the preserve of the young. Peggy Baker, now 51, has been refuting this notion for years. Like fine wine, she gets better with age; more complex yet also more distinctive. Baker can still move with the dynamic incisiveness that made her so exciting a quarter century ago, but today her dancing embraces the power of stillness and the resonance of silence. Call it the wise body.

Baker is in almost indecently fine physical shape and could easily pass herself off for much younger, yet she candidly reveals her age — assuming you can do some basic mental arithmetic — during *The Disappearance of Right and Left*, given its premiere on Tuesday night as part of Baker's current Toronto season.

Although choreographed for her by Sarah Chase, *Disappearance* is autobiographical. Chase

has carved a personal niche in the international dance scene with works that combine the telling of personal stories with a parallel stream of movement. The movement component is not overtly illustrative but, at its best, augments and enriches the meaning of the spoken words. In this instance Chase makes full use of Baker's wonderfully eloquent arms that carve the air in generous sweeping motions or settle momentarily into a detailed, sculptural pose.

As in her November, 2000, program, *Interior View*, Baker has chosen to invite the audience to be intimate participants in the performance by seating them on risers against the back wall of the large Betty Oliphant Theatre stage. It works especially well for *Disappearance*. Baker does not have a rich, trained actor's voice and her words might easily have been lost if projected, unamplified, into the actual auditorium.

The set, by Chase and Lucas Liepins, is a suspended billboard divided into 12 rectangular panels. Collectively they form a picture of a Prairie landscape, but each panel is successively swiv-

elled around to reveal images relevant to Baker's own story, rather as if she'd delved into a box of treasured postcards with each one triggering a particular memory.

Thus we hear about affecting and remarkable incidents in the lives of her Albertan ancestors, of Baker's disconcerting first meeting with Martha Graham, arch-goddess of American modern dance, and of her own inability to tell right from left. By the end, the incidents, small fragments of a life lived and of lives remembered, cohere in a way that prompts us to reflect on life and death, the patterning of experience and the perception of time.

Although *Disappearance* is the only brand new work in the current program, it also includes two notable local premieres and a chance to see dancers other than Baker perform her gruelling 2000 solo *Unfold*. It's part of the process Baker has initiated to pass on her choreography to a younger generation.

*Unfold* is not strictly a solo because pianist Andrew Burashko, who at different points plays from two strategically placed grands on stage, is far more than a musical accompanist in his brilliant performance of Scriabin's *Opus 11 Preludes*. The effect is more of a conversation.

Kate Alton, who danced *Unfold* at Tuesday's opening and will reappear tonight and at Sunday's matinee, is a fine dancer. She attacked Baker's choreography with enormous commitment,

but, as often happens when the creator has put such an indelible stamp on her own work, it's hard not to be reminded of the unique inflections and subtle rhythmic sense that Baker brings to the same movement. Over time, Alton will doubtless discover more room for herself within the framework Baker provides.

*Heaven*, a duet created last year for Burashko and Baker by longtime friend, American choreographer Doug Varone, is almost a mini-epic in its concentrated emotion and economical-yet-telling movement. While Burashko plays César Franck's *Prélude, Fugue et Variation*, Baker circles the piano, sits beside Burashko and sometimes gently guides his hands. Moving through moods of anger, frustration, defiance and compassion, it's as if Baker is a jealous lover trying to enter into Burashko's almost tortured communion with the music yet ultimately incorporating her own ego into an act of creation that is larger than both of them.

*A Way to Master Silence*, a short yet mysterious solo that precedes *Heaven*, presents Baker in deliberately fragmented form, viewed dimly in patterned pools of light. The movements we actually see are like pieces of an abstract jigsaw puzzle that float amorously in the imagination.

■ Peggy Baker is at the Betty Oliphant Theatre (404 Jarvis St.) until May 16. Tickets: 416-504-7529.

National Post