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NEWS

Sarah Chase

BY GLENN SUMI

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PORTRAITS/MAPPING choreography by Sarah Chase, with music by Bill Brennan. Presented by DanceWorks at the Harbourfront Centre Theatre (231 Queens Quay West), Thursday-Saturday (May 6-8) at 8 pm. \$24, stu/srs \$16. 416-973-4000. Rating: NNNNN

If Sarah Chase ever leaves the dance world, don't be surprised if she becomes a forensics expert. Think CSI: Toronto, minus the blood, guts and microscopes. For the last few years, the acclaimed dance-storyteller has travelled throughout Europe, rifling through the homes and lives of complete strangers and then presenting pieces culled from the historical and emotional clues she discovered.

"Yeah, sometimes I think I could become a detective," laughs the willowy Chase a few weeks before the Toronto premiere of Portraits/Mapping, a series of three of the 10 biographical portraits she created to huge acclaim in Europe. The show opens tonight (Thursday, May 6) at Harbourfront Centre.

I'm sitting in a small downtown studio where Chase is rehearsing the portraits for the first time in months. Besides the occasional hallway murmur and outside traffic, it's just Chase, me, my chair and a boom box. Can't get much more intimate than that.

Chase begins seductively spinning out the tale of Gust, a Communist and amateur painter in Brussels whose formative experience seems to have been two childhood years spent in a sanatorium.

Chase smiles enigmatically, her voice possessing a confidence and directness that wasn't quite there a few years ago when she performed her autobiographical Lamont Earth Observatory in Toronto. Her mysterious, repetitive movements – I know it sounds New Agey – have a cumulative healing power.

Within minutes I'm gripped by this story about someone whose life, through Chase, takes on extraordinary meaning.

“I really think it’s impossible to lead an uninteresting life,” she tells me a few hours later. There’s something about her that unnerves me, and suddenly I realize what it is. Her dark eyes seem to be all iris, as if she sees more than most.

“I thought it would be fascinating to look at people who didn’t think of themselves as interesting, and who weren’t even necessarily interested in the arts. I believe that within any life you can find patterns and synchronicities.”

Commissioned by a German arts festival, Chase travelled to four German cities. In each, she spent an entire day in a person’s apartment – the owner was put up in a hotel – followed by three days of interviews when she and musician Bill Brennan could ask the person anything. The next day Chase and Brennan performed a 45-minute piece in the owner’s apartment based on his or her life.

Talk about a fast turnaround.

Word of the project quickly spread, and soon Chase got asked to create portraits of people in Brussels, Paris, Geneva and Nottingham. Because of the limited space for audiences, people soon asked to sit in hallways or even bathrooms so they could hear, if not see, Chase perform.

More remarkable is the structure of the pieces. The exquisitely detailed stories have never been put down on paper. They coexist with Chase’s movement, something the choreographer jokingly compares to “rubbing my stomach, patting my head and speaking at the same time.

“I think the mind works differently when you’re moving,” she explains. “The text seems to fall out of my body. I have a specific dance vocabulary for each of the people I’m talking about, suggested by things like the architecture of their apartment, but I don’t have a set way of moving through that vocabulary. I improvise. I don’t memorize and can’t over-rehearse. I have to tell the story spontaneously.”

One long-time fan is Peggy Baker, who started off as one of Chase’s teachers back in the mid 1980s, then choreographed for her in the 90s. Now she’s commissioned Chase to create a biographical portrait for her (see sidebar).

“It’s like Sarah’s opened a door no one had opened before,” says Baker. “It’s absolutely authentic to her. It’s not like it’s concocted. I love seeing when someone finds their voice.”

The themes in Portraits/Mapping are huge. What constitutes a life? How do you make sense of tragedy? (The world wars figure prominently in the subjects’ lives.) Is there any meaning to existence?

This is material you normally associate with literature and philosophy, not contemporary dance.

“I think you can find a miniature model of man in the ancestry of a single person,” Chase tells me. “You can find both the dark and the light.”

Certainly, that’s been the case in Chase’s own life and work. She shows me a deck of tarot-like cards, each one containing an image that kick-starts a family memory. One harkens back to a great-great-great-grandfather who was a chief of the Wappinger Indians.

One goes back to another great-great-great-grandfather, a man who led the massacre of that very same tribe. One ancestor was a Quaker who lost his faith and became a slave-owner. Another ancestor, also a Quaker, went to Barbados in the 1840s and wrote a diary about the abolition of slavery that became one of the main texts supporting the abolition movement in the U.S.

“I have this opposition in my blood,” says Chase, who grew up in Vancouver in an extended family that included geologists, children’s book authors and professional dancers.

“I think you could make a deck of cards for anybody.

“Even if they don’t know their family history. Each of us has symbols. One friend heard about the death of his father just as he was looking at a kettle and it started whistling. For him, those moments are forever entwined. Now when he sees a kettle coming to a boil he’ll think of the death of his father.”

Telling other people’s stories through words and movement is an uncommon occupation for someone who started out as a modern dancer. But then again, Chase says she never felt like she entirely fit in in the dance scene.

“I never thought I was a really spectacular athletic dancer. I couldn’t jump higher than anyone or turn faster. In the mid-1980s, in companies like O Vertigo and La La La Human Steps, small, dynamic, athletic, androgynous powerhouse women were really in style. And that wasn’t me.”

Now she’s finding herself at a juncture. Her next project concerns stories, movement and animals. And she’s considering writing fiction based on her European portraits.

“I can’t just treat these people like they were just another project,” she sighs, turning her magnetic gaze downward. “I feel torn. There’s so much material here. So many lives. I need to exorcise it all a little bit more.”

UNFOLD with choreography by Peggy Baker, Sarah Chase and Doug Varone.
Presented by Peggy Baker Dance at the Betty Oliphant Theatre (404 Jarvis). May 11-16, Tuesday-Sunday 8:30 pm, matinee Sunday 2 pm. \$36. 416-504-7529.

Peggy Baker is telling a story about one of her great uncles, and she's about to lose it. Her eyes well up, her voice quivers for a second and you can practically feel the lump in her throat. Then she regains her composure. "I've known these stories about my grandparents and my father's uncles who died in the first world war for a long time," she tells me after the rehearsal. "I had no idea that when I told them I'd cry. I didn't even know those great uncles. But the story takes you to that place."

Guess that's what happens when you perform a Sarah Chase dance story.

Baker commissioned Chase to create a piece for her, titled *The Disappearance Of Right And Left*. It draws on everything from Baker's ancestors to her meeting dance legend Martha Graham.

Baker initially came up with 102 stories for the piece, and much of the process has been editing down.

"I only want to tell enough," says Baker. "If you don't tell enough it won't make sense, and if you tell too much the audience will want you to get to the point. I tried writing them down, but things that looked great on paper sounded pretentious when I spoke them."

This piece marks a milestone for the two. Baker was one of Chase's first teachers. Chase was the first person who ever danced in one of Baker's solo dance programs, back in 1997. Now Chase is the first person from a younger generation Baker's commissioned to choreograph for her.

"We made an instant connection," says dance veteran Baker of their first meeting in the mid-1980s. "That happens with a few people in one's life. Sarah was open to the ways I was talking about bringing movement to life. I think I was dancing in a way that she related to."

To Chase, Baker seemed like a completely realized artist. She especially liked the way Baker used imagery to enliven the dance.

"Peggy would talk about the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet being able to shine light in a certain direction," says Chase.

As for the movement she's choreographed for her mentor, Chase says she was inspired by Baker's long muscular arms.

"I was too tempted to make up things just to see her do them. A lot of the movement comes from the idea of scythes and lifting bales. I think of Peggy as some sort of goddess of the wheat."