

**KEITH GAREBIAN - STAGE AND PAGE WEBSITE**

# MUSIC FOR PIANO AND SOLO DANCER

Peggy Baker Dance Projects  
at the Betty Oliphant Theatre  
February 5-6, 2005

As I watched Peggy Baker in her three solo dances, I was convinced she is the Vanessa Redgrave of dance. Like Redgrave, she is tall, strong, big-boned, and supple, with amazingly powerful and expressive hands. She is focused, centred, and intense. Her technique is extraordinary, of course, but it is never on display merely for itself. We marvel at its range, but our greatest awe is for the poetic lyricism it yields. Baker's dancing, like Redgrave's acting, goes beyond fine points of balance, tension, contrast, dynamism, and difficulty into areas of emotional and spiritual truth. Whether she is still or executing delicate half-phrases or going full out in bold swoops, leaps, jaggedly angular semaphores, or forming triangular patterns with her head and elbows, or sinking to the floor and then rising with knees locked but no arm support, we trust her implicitly because her expressiveness saturates every pore and fibre of her being. She seems to dance because she needs to communicate some mystery from deep within her soul, so even in an abstract piece, such as *In A Landscape*, where she seems to be a still centre or a precisely articulated soloist to the music of John Cage as played by Andrew Burashko, she is the very essence of the self-probing artist.



The swooping, gathering hand movements of this piece yield to different distributions of physical tension in *furthermore*, where her body perceptibly and thrillingly responds to piano chords and phrases. Her stark and often startling economy of movement stands in relief from a moment when she seems to vibrate from head to toe in symbiotic relationship to pianist Burashko, who proves to be her creative collaborator rather than a mere accompanist in the first three solos. Burashko, like Baker, expresses the spirit of the music and not simply its phrasings and modulations. In *furthermore* he stands at the piano, actually leaning toward it, as Baker keeps close to him, responding to the piano's impulses and Burashko's physical manipulations of tones and keys. He is emphatically a dramatic character in *Why The Brook Wept*, a classic, expressionistic interpretation of the interplay between Ophelia and Hamlet, culminating in Ophelia's madness and suicide. In total black, Burashko begins as a silent, brooding figure at the piano. When he begins to play, it is virtually as an attack on Baker's Ophelia who manifests everything from virginal innocence and vulgar lust to mental breakdown and spasms of despair. Baker is in her early fifties, but her age never muddies the image of her Ophelia. We don't see an incongruity between the dancer and the role because Baker is totally compelling in her shifts of mood and choreography. As Ophelia descends farther and farther into madness, Baker pulls out the stops, executing quick leaps and amazingly wide-legged stances, with some Martha Graham leaps and semaphores. Her dance is a dramatic conversation with Burashko's piano technique, a point brought home at the end when he has apparently "killed" her by his attack and then slowly closes the piano lid before walking off without concern to her corpse at the foot of his stool.

Baker doesn't perform the fourth solo on the program. Instead, she generously passes on her



choreography to Rex Harrington and Sasha Ivanochko who essay *Brute* on alternative nights. I saw Harrington perform the piece on the first night, and though it was obvious that he had worked hard and magnificently on the taxing steps, his response was rehearsed rather more than impulsive. *Brute* is Baker's response to Picasso's *Guernica*, and it is brutally demanding in terms of energy, movement, and tempo. Set to Prokofiev's *Sonata No. 6 in A major, op.82*, as played by Burashko with characteristic feeling and clarity, it often has a violence that is exercised through forms of dislocated movement. Harrington's classical grace and elegance are a better fit as aesthetic response than are his twisted shapes and staccato explosions, but strangely, Caroline O'Brien's costuming for him fails to express any sense of Picasso's great painting. Instead of being in black and white, Harrington is in plum trousers bespattered with white paint. Needless to say, this is hardly in keeping with Picasso's cubism and expressionism. However, there is no flaw in Marc Parent's lighting that is, as in the preceding pieces, superbly revelatory of the awesome power of dance.

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