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Peggy Baker still Brute force

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DANCE WRITER

It was a gift from a queen to a queen. The queen of contemporary dance, Peggy Baker, bestowed her 1994 solo, *Brute*, on Rex Harrington, late of the National Ballet of Canada, where he was for years its reigning star. Harrington danced the solo Saturday night in the first performance of Baker's show at the Betty Oliphant Theatre, *music for piano and solo dancer*. At yesterday's performance, Sasha Ivanochko danced *Brute*.

The presence of pianist Andrew Burashko seated at his grand piano, playing Serge Prokofiev's *Sonata No.6 in A Major, op. 82*, means that *Brute* is not exactly a solo. And one's mental image of the painting that inspired Baker to make this lengthy piece, Pablo Picasso's homage to the victims of the Spanish Civil War, *Guernica*, makes another active presence.

Newly shorn and sporting a glint of silver in his cropped hair, Harrington delivered a heroic effort to make the piece his own. No shortage of passion here, but it was disconcerting to see the ballet dancer barefoot, wearing a pyjama-like costume adapted to his male physique, interpreting steps and gestures so inseparably associated with Baker's taller, longer-limbed, thoroughly female and modern being. Harrington nevertheless gave it all he had. Ever the clown, he mocked near-collapse to an appreciative audience, acknowledging that, though he has a good 10 years on Baker, this was no simple dance to get through.

Burashko's spirited playing of a score that is tailor-made for dance, with as many moods as movements, added another dimension to the dance. The notes and the steps interacted to make two melodic lines, one aural, one visual. Harrington stretched his feet and heaved his muscled torso into the part, but whenever a thought occurred, such as "that's not the way she holds her hands," one was reminded that Baker's choreography is unique because it is so particular to her anatomy.

Brute is the sixth and last dance of Baker's to be passed on to other dancers through The Choreographer's Trust, a project that began in 2002.

Baker herself performed the first three of her works on the program, all of them choreographed to the music of John Cage during the '90s. Dancing *In a Landscape*, from the Cage piece of the same name composed in 1948, Baker performed under a single spotlight, set off from the piano as if they were seen on a split screen. Lighting designer Marc Parent has her in a swirling, coloured, moiré pattern, like a whirlpool. The tinkling notes of the music, the fluidity of her movements and the shadows from lighting combined to make the dancer appear as if she was under water.

In *furthermore*, she danced closer to the pianist, who was also upright, to pluck the strings of

the piano. This solo is done in Baker's more angular style and ends up with her embracing Burashko from behind. In *Why the Brook Wept*, one of her most memorable solos, Baker embodies Ophelia, to the Cage music made for a dance by Jean Erdman in 1946.

Originally trained as an actor, Baker fills these characters as much as any speaking performer. Wearing a body-hugging gown designed by Caroline O'Brien, she scarcely moves her feet from one spot, like a life-size portrait come to life. But every element of her is dancing, from her ribcage to her pelvic bones to her shoulder blades and those incomparable, eloquently reaching arms.

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