

Dance treasure at top of her game

By Holly Harris

IN another lifetime, Peggy Baker may have been a venerable oak tree, holding an entire world of experience in her impossibly long and strong limbs.

The Canadian modern dance icon's current production, *The Heart Moves*, is being presented as the jewel in the crown of Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers season, with a three-day run that closes Saturday night at the Gas Station Theatre.

It's been far too long since Winnipeg has seen this consummate artist, last appearing here during the WCD's now-defunct dance festival in 1990. The 90-minute show includes three works and marks the final stop in a five-city Canadian tour by her Toronto based company.

Given the fact that most dancers at age 53 have either transitioned into teaching or choreographing careers, it's amazing that Baker still actively performs, retaining all the strength and power of a dancer half her age.

The single duet of the evening, *In Thine Eyes* (1996), choreographed by Doug Varone, depicts a robotic mating ritual between Baker and fellow performer Larry Hahn. The two exist only in relationship to the other, slicing through the space, creating their own

DanceReview

The Heart Moves

- Peggy Baker Dance Projects
- Gas Station Theatre
- Feb. 16-18

★★★★ out of five

quirky bird-like code of communication. The final release as they ultimately come to rest with each other's bodies reveals the couple as two vulnerable parts of a whole, all too achingly human.

This would be a very different dance with younger performers, with Hahn's mature presence lending a particularly satisfying quality to the work.

Shadows loomed larger than life in Baker's newest solo, *Krishna's Mouth* (2006), choreographed herself to an evocative cello and electronic score by Japanese composer Karen Tanaka, and based on the mythic tale of Hindu deity Lord Krishna. Baker also acts as narrator, punctuating her story with fluid, if not overly dynamic, movement.

Flecks of Indian movement make their presence, and although greater contrasts would have helped heighten the drama even further, the overall

effect is one of a deeply felt personal narrative.

Anytime a dancer speaks on stage potentially spells trouble. In Baker's hands, however, the text becomes an integral part of the texture, undoubtedly aided by her own formal training in acting and the prism of emotion that she brings to this tender story.

The third work of the evening, *Non Coupable* (1983) — translated as *Not Guilty* — by Montreal-based Paul-André Fortier, offers a taste of this wildly imagistic and visual choreographer's vision. A blindfolded Baker, with wrists bound by ropes to two granite rocks, conveys an emotional prison as she struggles to express her desires — carnal and otherwise — in a painful portrait of a woman frozen by personal impotence. Baker's final shedding of her blindfold creates a harrowing moment that opens a Pandora's box of both liberating self-recognition and terrifying freedom.

Baker belongs to an upper echelon of artists from whom younger (and older) generations can learn much. Hopefully it won't be another 15 years until she graces our Winnipeg stages again. But in case it is, local dance aficionados would be well advised to catch this show and see one of our national dance treasures at the top of her game.