

SplitScreen captures Peggy Baker at her most narrative

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 23, 2017

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Peggy Baker announced her retirement as a dancer a few years ago. Lucky for Toronto audiences that the terms of this retirement haven't been particularly strict.

SplitScreen, her company's latest four-work program at Toronto's Theatre Centre, ends with a poetic solo from 2013 called *epilogue*, which Baker performs to the

amped guitar playing of Tim Motzer. It's the kind of rich and subtle work that has the tenor of both a swan song and a career synecdoche – a part that can stand in for in the whole. It's trademark Baker, practically all torso with her long swooping arms and reactive spine. Her presence is so grounded in its sense of space and self that you can imagine roots under her feet, growing well beneath the stage.

The stage effects are simple: a rectangle of light and two chairs, with Motzer sitting in a corner upstage. Baker appears between these chairs, dressed elegantly in black with her silver hair tied off her face. She allows herself more visible emotion than her dancers do earlier in the program, letting a stamped foot and slapped thigh precipitate a flash of anger. The 13-minute piece consists almost entirely of Baker manipulating the empty chairs, tilting one onto the other with an exacting purposefulness, as though recreating scenes between two people – two lovers – from memory. In its power and understated theatricality, I was reminded of Pina Bausch in her later masterpiece *Café Muller*.

Understated theatricality might be a good way of looking at the whole program, which consists (with the exception of *Yang* from 1998) of self-contained excerpts from longer works. The selections capture Baker at her most narrative, which isn't a word you'd typically associate with her choreography. But something about the way she has placed these selections side by side emphasizes their ability to suggest stories, exposing tensions between the individual and the crowd and finding moments of stark intimacy in duets.

The program begins with a remount of the final solo from Baker's 2015 math-themed work *locus plot*. When I saw its premiere, the solo – which features Kate Holden in a shimmering shift dress and bare feet – felt beautifully impersonal, exploring friction, sound and emotion in an abstracted way. Its reimagining in the Theatre Centre's black box is a more aggressively personal, and contentious, affair. Set to helicopter sounds of propellers and wind, Holden ends up in a downstage corner while the other dancers cluster like black shadows upstage. Sitting on her heels, Holden heaves and pants into the floor, then rolls onto her back and brings her knees to her chest. The crowd ignores her, and as Holden repeats this sequence a few times, we see a

woman in distress wearing a party dress, isolated from help. The image is unavoidably disturbing.

Split Screen Stereophonic (2013) makes similar use of dramatic images that hover between the personal and the symbolic. The piece begins with Holden and Sarah Fregeau dancing side by side against parallel screens. Soon, they're joined by Ric Brown and David Norsworthy respectively, and two duets unfold. There are repeated gestures that suggest romantic love: Norsworthy brings his lips to the inside of Fregeau's wrist; Holden and Brown take one another's cheek in hand. Their expressions remain impassive; Baker's interest isn't in character but how bodies, at a remove, can hint at stories of the heart. In her program notes, Baker writes of being inspired by "private lives revealed through apartment windows," and you see this in the sense that her dancers aren't quite undergoing the experiences of intimacy that their motions represent. Instead, they embody both their own stories and the aloofness of being watched from a distance.

Yang (1998/2003) consists of two solos – one is a reconfigured version of the original – performed simultaneously by Norsworthy and Brown. Unlike the rest of the program, it focuses on theme and effect more than story and relationship. Set to percussion music by Belgian composer and filmmaker Thierry De Mey, it's bright, athletic and invigorating. Norsworthy, a recent graduate of the Juilliard School and making his debut with Baker's company, is an exceptionally lucid performer, technically impressive and articulate with choreographic detail.

SplitScreen continues at Theatre Centre in Toronto until Feb. 26.

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