

# PERFORMING ARTS

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## A Matter of Interpretation

Peggy Baker's solo dance programs have driven critics into adjectival overdrive in search of a worthy description.

By Jennifer Fisher

**O**n videotape, Peggy Baker is dancing a beautifully articulate Juliet to the familiar passionate violins of Prokofiev. But this Juliet is not fluttering demurely on her toes—she is barefoot, with starkly cropped blond hair and a solidly weighted sense of longing. In James Kudelka's duet, "Romeo and Juliet Before Parting," Baker strikes an exceptional balance between active and passive energies. Caressed and lifted by partner Sylvain Lafortune, she also makes some advances: holds him firmly, lowers him to the floor. She is the perfect postmodern romantic heroine, lyrically strong and muscularly delicate.

Such control, contrast and charisma—so alien to most Juliets—are not only prominent in this performance, they are hallmarks of Peggy Baker's career.

When she was part of a dance company—whether it was Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project in the '90s, the New York-based Lar Lubovitch Dance Company in the '80s or Toronto's Dancemakers in the '70s—Baker was always easy to single out. As fellow Canadian k.d. lang might put it, she's a "big-boned gal." She is also a dancer with the gift of molding or melting her angles into moments of riveting intensity.

Performing in solo programs since 1990, often in collaboration with composers and musicians, Baker's charisma factor has been tested big-time. And from all reports, it's alive and well. Her performances of commissioned pieces and, increasingly, her own work, have driven dance writers into the land of metaphor and adjectival contrast: Now 43, Baker has been called a warrior goddess, a school girl, an



LOIS GREENFIELD

**FREEDOM:** "I had my own things to say," says Baker of going solo.

Amazon. And luminous, compassionate, voluptuous, explosive—but also cool, deliberate and cerebral.

Audiences here will have a chance to choose their own adjectives when Baker and her frequent collaborator, pianist Andrew Burashko, bring "music for piano and solo dancer" to the Luckman Theatre on the campus of Cal State L.A. next Sunday at 4 p.m. The program—all local premieres by Baker—includes one

1994 piece to a Prokofiev sonata and two new solos to John Cage music from the '40s.

"The whole concert is a piano recital with dance, really," says Baker on the phone from her downtown Toronto home. "Andrew isn't a dance accompanist, he has a concert career, and my work is seen in relation both to the piano and the pianist himself."

For a dancer, some of the benefits of having live music are



MARILYN GILBERT

**KEY PLAYER:** Pianist Andrew Burashko produces the music for Baker's expressive moves.

obvious, and Baker speaks eloquently about feeling the piano's vibrations, about the spontaneity of movements that "bounce off" the music and are "of the moment." But she also talks about the way Burashko's bodily presence affects her choreographic process and the audience's perceptions.

"I think that the physicality of a good musician is just supremely beautiful, and it's the kind of authenticity that I aspire to in my own performance. I want to be onstage as a person dancing, not an abstract figure, and I find that the presence of a musician really facilitates that for everybody. If I'm the least bit phony, I look ridiculous because he's so genuine. He's not pretending to do anything."

**I**n fact Burashko, 30, is so attuned to his own performance he is rarely aware of Baker's movements during concerts. But their collaboration has affected him at several points before then. Early discussions take them through the score in some detail, as they share technical information and the feelings and images the music evokes. Then Baker spends a few weeks choreographing to tapes of Burashko, eventually showing him a videotape of her "first draft."

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More adjustments take place in later rehearsals.

"The insights Peggy gives me happen when I'm able to see her dancing," says Burashko, also on the phone from Toronto, where he's preparing for a guest appearance with the Manitoba Chamber Orchestra. "I doubt I would be doing this with anybody else. She has this incredible sensitivity, and when I see how she interprets the music, it gives me a clearer vision of what I'm trying to do."

The process is one that isn't "terribly concrete or material," Burashko says, but the results have become clearer to him now that so many audience members have commented on their obvious rapport. "In a really subtle way, I am encouraged by Peggy's affirmation of what I'm doing," he says. "She's expressing in movement exactly what I'm trying to express through the music. And by giving me that extra dimension, this visual sense, it enriches my sense of what I'm doing."

In some cases, as with Baker's solo "Brute," to Prokofiev's Sonata No. 6 in A major, Burashko be-

lieves the visual dimension helps make a challenging musical work more accessible. For Baker, the challenge was also spatial, since the piano is placed center stage for this piece. Working with narrow strips of space and coincidentally reading about Picasso at the time led her to study reproductions of his "Guernica" for inspiration.

"First of all, the painting is huge, but it has no depth because it was Cubist," Baker says. "And just the scale of it, completely pressed up on the surface of the canvas—it's not even pretending to be deep—it's like my being pushed right up between the piano and the audience. I ended up with all these movements that are two dimensional, percussive and very angular."

Part of Baker's research for another piece on the program, "Why the Brook Wept," was re-reading "Hamlet," since the music she wanted to use was Cage's "Ophelia." She hadn't expected to create a piece about the character (as Jean Erdman did when Cage wrote the music for her in 1945), but Baker was soon taken by how well she felt Cage had captured Ophelia dramatically.

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**Peggy Baker**

"I think people are going to be surprised that the pieces we've chosen are [by] John Cage," Baker says. "They're not what people are typically afraid of—that it's not going to make any sense, that it's going to be dissonant and not have any rhythm. There's one called 'In a Landscape,' from 1948, which is extremely beautiful, very serene, like a Zen garden, with these tiny details that emerge, tiny asymmetries and flaws in the rhythm. It has all the beauty of nature inside of it."

The one piece Burashko plays alone is Cage's "Music for Piano No. 2" (1953), which incorporates the concept of indeterminacy, for which Cage is better known. The score indicates only pitches and their sequence, so their arrangement is left up to the performer.

About the interpretation of the Russian-born, Canadian-raised Burashko, Baker quotes a friend who said, "Only Andrew could make John Cage sound romantic."

Embarking on a solo dance venture is intimidating enough for any dancer, but in 1990 Baker had to make the decision to leave one of the most high-profile groups—Baryshnikov's White Oak project—to do it. "It was really great working with these wonderful dancers, and it was exciting working with Baryshnikov," she says. "It wasn't what I expected. He is so profoundly talented. I thought his ego would be much more in the studio and it wasn't at all. He's just able to go directly to what the choreographer wants."

If she had been 10 years younger, Baker says now, she would have been in heaven and stayed with White Oak. Instead, there was this itch to take more control. "I had my own things to say and the time had come for me to choose everything about what I was putting on stage. You only have one lifetime, and I knew if I stayed there a few more years. . . . I had to choose, and in the end it wasn't really that hard."

Baker is not troubled by the isolation that could result from a

solo career. Since her husband, composer Ahmed Hassan, is virtually housebound with multiple sclerosis, she makes the most of her time in the studio by herself. "I get very little time alone at home, so I appreciate the solitude," she says. "If I didn't have that time in my life, I don't know what I'd do."

As well, she has her work with students of Toronto's National Ballet School, where she has been artist-in-residence for three years. Already, the effects of the students' contact with a singularly strong and self-motivated modern dancer can be seen in year-end concerts that feature budding ballerinas performing her dances. "I think my work with them gives them an idea of what's important about each one of them, to not be afraid to be who they are as dancers. Because in the ballet world, it's totally about conformity unless you're at a very high level. What I hope I've given them is the license to be themselves as dancers."

Not always an easy road, as Baker can attest. But based on audience and critical reaction, it's the one worth taking. □

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