



JOHN LAUENER

Benjamin Kamino in *Encoded Revision*, part of *Stereophonic* at the Betty Oliphant Theatre.

A visual and aural treat

Peggy Baker Dance Projects: Stereophonic

★★★½ (out of 4)

Choreography by Peggy Baker. Until March 3, Betty Oliphant Theatre, 404 Jarvis St. 1-800-838-3006 or peggybakerdance.com

MICHAEL CRABB

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Those ancient enough may recall the audible marvel of early stereophony. In contrast to flat, monophonic reproduction, the idea was to record and deliver sound through discrete channels that, for the listener, would reproduce a sense of perspective and direction and generally simulate a more natural aural experience. Peggy Baker plays on and extends this concept in her current program, *Stereophonic*.

Baker, long known as a mesmerizing performer, has now, at age 60, re-established herself primarily as a choreographer. She's passing on earlier solos of hers to younger dancers and creating new works in which she will never perform.

Dance, even when it does not deploy multimedia effects, is almost invariably a multi-channelled sensory experience of sight and sound. Baker has often underlined this by incorporating musicians as intimate, visible co-performers and by paying meticulous attention to the way light, or its absence, can articulate a three-dimensional space.

Thus in three of the five works in *Stereophonic*, pianist/composer John Kameel Farah is much more than accompanist. In a revival of Baker's *Encoded Revision* from 1997, now danced with a compelling rawness by Benjamin Kamino, Farah even gets to declaim some of the text that drives the work's quasi-narrative thread.

For longtime Baker followers the program also offers what you might call the stereophony of memory. As the estimable Andrea Nann puts her personal stamp on Baker's 1995 solo *In a Landscape*, the choreographer's own remembered presence in the same work hovers like a distant echo.

But it's in the program's centrepiece, *Split Screen Stereophonic*, one of three new works, that Baker most obviously explores her overarching theme.

In the first section, Sarah Fregeau and Sahara Morimoto dance in discrete squares of light. Their movements counterpoint, mirror and echo each other or occasionally slip into unison. There is a mood of introspection and emotional yearning, the significance of which is made clearer with the arrival of Kamino and Sean Ling.

Again, the choreography allots what are now two couples to lighting designer Marc Parent's clearly designated portions of the stage. Baker offers hot-and-cold images of fraught emotion, intimacy and detachment operating within two relationships. Is there a correlation? Do the two choreographic channels add up to more than the sum of their parts? At times it seems so, yet one's attention tends to be drawn to one or the other, particularly to Kamino and Fregeau, whose interactions are the most intense and frankly erotic. It's the kind of piece you really want to see several times.

The same goes for the program closer, Baker's new, self-performed solo *Epilogue*. Who would have thought anyone could spend 10 minutes essentially negotiating and rearranging two plain wooden chairs and make it such an eloquent yet open-ended commentary on a relationship lost, remembered and treasured?