

ENTERTAINMENT

DANCE

Baker's new project scores

**Peggy Baker Dance Projects:
The sound and feel of it**

★★★★ (out of four)

Choreography by Peggy Baker
Until Jan. 29; Betty Oliphant Theatre,
404 Jarvis St. 1-888-222-6608 or
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MICHAEL CRABB

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Peggy Baker is recreating herself. Until now, even if she occasionally allows others to perform them, the celebrated Canadian dancer has mostly choreographed works for herself. With her latest Toronto program, however, Baker unveils a mesmerizing new dance, made from the ground up for other dancers.

Epic in scope, inventive in structure and emotionally nuanced, it could well earn Baker yet another Dora Award.

She recounts in a program note that *Piano/Quartet*, which received its premiere Friday night before a sold-out audience, was inspired by poetry of John Cage, a man more famous for his ground-breakingly innovative music. "You do not hear the poems," writes Baker, "you see them danced."

Since Cage's poetry is not as wide-



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ly familiar as that of other literary masters, we must take Baker's word for it. Yet, as we watch her dynamite cast — Ric Brown, Sean Ling, Sahara Morimoto and Andrea Nann — dance to a substantial chunk of Cage's acclaimed 1948 *Sonatas and Interludes*, we can only conclude that both his poetry and music share similar compositional concerns. They shake up conventions and reassemble them into a whole new universe.

When he wrote the music, Cage

had fallen under the spell of Indian thought. Whether or not the score exactly reflects the varying emotions of the *rasa* aesthetic, the Asian influence is clearly apparent in this work for prepared piano — played live with compelling sensitivity by John Kameel Farah.

Baker deploys her four dancers as an ensemble but also in varied solos, duets and trios that reflect the score's structure. The music animates the dance and the dance elucidates the music. The movement has all the less-is-more economy of means that have become Baker hallmarks.

Piano/Quartet is preceded by two extraordinary and sharply contrasted solos. Baker has refashioned her 2008 *In the Fire of Conflict* for the fiery intensity and explosive physicality of dancer Benjamin Kamino.

Titled after its score, by Canadian composer Christos Hatzis, performed live by percussionist Beverley Johnston, the solo's emotional arc responds equally to the gritty, sometimes chilling words of rapper Buggy H (a.k.a. Steven Henry). While the movement vocabulary, like that of *Piano/Quartet*, understandably reflects Baker's almost

analytical deployment of arms, subtle gesture and contrasting dynamics, Kamino now makes it very much his own eloquent statement.

In her only appearance, Baker revives another 2008 solo, *Portal*.

The choreography has the economy and expressiveness of a fine etching, suggesting the physically expansive dancer Baker once was while realistically acknowledging who she is now. Baker, enveloped by a gaping black void and an eerie silence, appears and disappears in the beams of light sequentially provided by Marc Parent. It's almost like a duet with light — heroic, mysterious and sublime.

Baker has been slowly winding down the intensity of her performing career in recent years and will be turning 60 in October. This program surely signals a major turning point in Baker's transition from dancer to dedicated choreographer. It could also mark, hard as it is to contemplate, Baker's final public performances, which, apart from the overall excellence of this immaculately crafted program, including Caroline O'Brien's costumes, provides even more reason to see it before it closes next Sunday.