

Peggy Baker's he:she: Review

Dancer/choreographer Peggy Baker's interest in a broad range of dualities is explored in her new program she:he.



MAKOTO HIRATA PHOTO

Sean Ling, Ric Brown and Mateo Galindo Torres in "stone leaf shell skin." part of the new program by Peggy Baker.

By: **Michael Crabb** Dance, Published on Sat Mar 29 2014

Peggy Baker Dance Projects: he:she

Choreography by Peggy Baker. Until April 6 at Betty Oliphant Theatre, 404 Jarvis St., Toronto; 1-888-838-3006 or peggybakerdance.com

The notion that people may be judged by the company they keep applies to respected artists as much as to discredited municipal politicians. That multi-award-winning, honour-laden dancer/choreographer Peggy Baker can attract such sterling collaborators speaks volumes about the esteem in which she's held.

For her current four-part program, which opened Friday, Baker assembles a formidable roster of dancers while also drawing on the artistry of such notables, among others, as choreographer Paul-André Fortier, [cellist Shauna Rolston](#), composer Heather Schmidt and lighting designer Marc Parent.

It's always been this way with Baker. Regardless of the work on view, concerning which opinions will naturally vary, there's a dependably high level of quality and professionalism.

Baker explains that she chose *she:he* as the 90-minute program's overarching title because of her interest in a broad range of dualities.

Any dance for two is in itself a duality but in her new "Aleatoric Duet No. 2" Baker plays not just on the visual-kinetic contrast of male and female but on the intersections that arise by way of its composition.

Sean Ling and Andrea Nann each brought solos of their own to the studio. Baker sculpted them into a duet. John Kameel Farah, armed with keyboard and computer and perched above the action, improvises an atmospheric electronic accompaniment. Parent's lighting continuously redefines the working space with a clinical precision that complements this engrossing if somewhat emotionally austere duet.

Farah, now at the piano, is joined on stage by Rolston and clarinetist Max Christie for Baker's 1998 "Sylvan Quartet," the solo dance role now passed on from the choreographer to Sahara Morimoto. The musicians' onstage performance of Chan Ka Nin's score is as integral to the overall effect as Morimoto's awareness of their presence as she negotiates the varied moods and rhythmic contours of the music.

Baker and Schmidt both found inspiration in the iconic black and white images of celebrated 20th-century American photographer Edward Weston for "stone leaf shell skin," a dance trio for Ric Brown, Ling and Mateo Galindo Torres. Rolston plays the central live cello part against the eerie electronic drone of Schmidt's commissioned score.

The abstract work is punctuated by successive moments of stillness with the men in silhouette. The most evocative dance passage comes towards the end, when the men, working from the floor, seem part of some languid shared reverie.

Understandably, at age 61, Baker rations her performances, careful of their physical demands.

A year ago, in a self-made solo called "Epilogue," she generated haunting emotional resonances by essentially rearranging two wooden chairs. This season Baker achieves a similar effect performing a version of Fortier's 2006 solo, "Box."

The cardboard grocery box that gives the work its name is far more than a prop. Baker circles it tentatively, imbuing its presence with mysterious significance. As the solo evolves, it acquires the quality of a strange duet. The box, variously manipulated to expose a cross-pattern on its base, becomes an emblem of retrieved memories, even a portal into the dancer's inner consciousness.

Baker gives a thoughtfully intense performance, proving that even as the dancing body ages its innate intelligence continues to grow.