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Peggy Baker Dance Projects

April 13, 2019

who we are in the dark



Reviewed April 12, 2019

NAC Babs Asper Theatre, Ottawa

(Repeat performance April 13, 7:30 p.m.)

Peggy Baker's newest dance project, *who we are in the dark*, is an impressive collaboration with musicians associated with Montreal indie rock band Arcade Fire, the late artist John Heward, and Baker's long-time lighting design partner Marc Parent.

An icon of Canadian contemporary dance, Baker often presents works that are something to behold. She is not afraid to experiment with the media of movement, music and other arts. When she teams up with others, she is at her best — the additional resources bring to life her disciplined, audacious and provocative creativity. For this latest work, all her collaborators are Canadian.



Sarah Neufeld

Particularly spectacular in *who we are in the dark* is the stunning performance by abstract violinist Sarah Neufeld. Neufeld and Ottawa-born drummer Jeremy Gara grace stage right throughout the 65-minute show in a unique accompaniment. The driving drums and the soothing strings create a vibrant push-pull energy.

Also striking is the projection design by award-winning filmmaker Jeremy Mimmagh. Mostly black-and-white beautiful abstract images project onto the back wall and the floor, creating a futuristic world for the seven dancers onstage.

The performers largely work as a collective, seemingly reacting to unseen forces. Sometimes they are linked in a long chain. Their synchronized movement binds the work, portending a sense of community, the idea that they are all in this together.

Baker says *who we are in the dark* explores “the alluring darkness of night, intimacy, sexuality, the unconscious, the creeping darkness of uncertainty and malice, the confounding darkness of bafflement, secrets, the unknown, the dreadful darkness of cruelty, suffering, grief, the comforting darkness of condolence and contemplation.”

This may well have been a starting point for Baker's work, but the dance does not tell any kind of story per se. The dancers are dressed in black and sometimes wear hooded sweaters and crawl animalistically across the stage, but there is no sense of malice or dread. Moreso it is a show that delights in sound, light and movement.

Cleverly choreographed breaks keep the audience focused and stimulated. For example, after a phrase of thunderous drumming, sharp spot lighting and furiously flashing projections onto the floor and backdrop, with no dancers onstage, suddenly a couple enter the stage and perform a serene duet to a soulful string accompaniment, creating a welcome tranquility amongst the chaotic sound. Neufeld gradually introduces lovely haunting vocals to her violin solo, taking us to a magical place.

Later Neufeld enters centre stage under a bright spotlight while the dancers are no more than shadowy presences. As her contribution is a significant and dynamic part of the work overall, it is only fitting that her performance should be thus featured.

The accompaniment at times is nothing more than the dancers' own breathing, whispers, squeaks and growls or simply their exhalations of exertions.

A series of duets between two men, two women and a couple draw the work to its conclusion, which features a lone dancer on a coloured floor.