



Review: BEAUTIFUL RENEGADES

by LYNN on SEPTEMBER 28, 2022

in [THE PASSIONATE PLAYGOER](#)

Live and in person at the Theater Centre, Franco Boni Theatre, Toronto, Ont. Until Oct. 2, 2022

www.theatrecentre.org

A bitter-sweet production because Beautiful Renegades is dance titan Peggy Baker's last project before she steps aside and lets the younger generation have a chance to produce art.

The Story. After a long and illustrious career Peggy Baker is retiring, closing down the Peggy Baker Dance Projects and making room for a new generation of dance makers. She's doing it by paying homage to the dance pioneers of the 1970s, in a sense the dancers who informed her work when she began.

I love how the press information describes ***Beautiful Renegades***: "A new play celebrating the end of an era, honouring the artists of the present moment by looking to the past..." ***Beautiful Renegades*** is an ode to the young dance artists who helped pave the way for change in 1970s Toronto, through innovation and acts of artistic rebellion." The play was written by Michael Ross Albert, a gifted playwright who has done a lot of research about the dance world of the 1970s for this project. I'm mighty impressed with the play because Michael Ross Albert wasn't born at the time of the play, but has put the audience right in the time of the 1970s. (I speak from personal experience of that time).

Again, from the press info: “This play was inspired by an artist-run dance centre called 15 Dance Lab that operated in Toronto between 1974-1980. When it first opened just two dance companies dominated the Toronto scene: the National Ballet and Toronto Dance Theatre. At 15 Dance Lab, the dancers rejected popular expectations for dance and aligned themselves with leftist politics and the avant-garde in visual and media arts. It was THE social scene for Toronto’s burgeoning independent dance milieu.”

So, this sets up the situation. Of the two predominant dance companies, one was a ballet company and the other was a modern dance company. But what if a young dancer didn’t want to conform to the dictates of either of these two companies? Enter 15 Dance Lab. The play introduces us to six dancers who want to create their own work on their own terms and over the course of the play, they do create their own work. We also get a sense of the difficulties, jealousies and other challenges.

The Production. The production is terrific. Every part of it is meticulously thought out, researched, respected and realized. The audience sits on either side of the playing area in Gillian Gallow’s set. The stage is bare except for illumination (kudos to Jeff Pybus) on the floor that tells us the year (beginning in 1974 and ending in 1980). On one end of the stage there is shelving for electronic equipment, a stool, etc. On either side of the playing area are several wood chairs that will be used during the production, for the ‘attending audience’, for props etc.

I’ve already spoken about how playwright Michael Ross Albert put us right in that time. The director is Eda Holmes began as a dancer and danced with various American and European companies before segueing into theatre directing. So, she knows her way around dancers. Her direction is fluid, almost balletic and also has a modern feel to it.

Peggy Baker choreographed *Beautiful Renegades* by referencing segments of dance pieces created by six notable dancer/choreographers from 15 Dance Lab during the 1970s. She contacted them all directly to meticulously recreate the segments of the original choreography. She watched videos of the time to get it right. Then she taught the choreography for the six performers in the show. Here’s the astonishing thing: of the six performers three are professional dancers and three are professional actors. How did that work out? Could I tell the difference? That’s one of the many beauties of *Beautiful Renegades*. I couldn’t tell. The actors are credible dancers— all six

performers engage in an energetic dance piece at the end and it looked seamless and cohesive. And the dancers are good actors; compelling, lively and in the moment. Only when you look at each biography in the program do we realize that some are dancers and some are actors and all are wonderful and committed in this piece.

I loved that whole sense of the group's independence; their need to do their own kind of dance and not be locked into a specific form. They were inventing their own.

In the first scene they are getting ready to do a performance created by Mia (Erika Prevost) who I believe also wrote a rather esoteric poem to accompany the piece. Mia enters and positions herself on the stool to watch the performance. Only two people turn up to watch the show as an audience: one named Hart (Jarrett Siddall) was going out with a dancer in the company and the other was Beth (Anne van Leeuwen), a notable dancer who had been in New York for a few years and came back, and eventually joined the company at this new space. In spite of the poor attendance, this didn't stop them, the company went ahead with the performance. Mia sat quietly watching, mouthing the poem as the dancers recited it while dancing.

It's interesting to note that all the problems that plagued these eager, young dancers—funding, finding a space to perform, attracting an audience, being able to support themselves and still dance—are the same problems today. Some things don't change.

I was intrigued by a segment in which the dancers created their own magazine to write about their work etc. But then Mia wrote blistering and personal essays about Beth's work which she found hurtful. Mia thought Beth could deal with the criticism since it was meant to strengthen the work. What Mia wrote wasn't a review—I personally don't think it's a given that reviews are negative. What Mia wrote was an essay in which the writer thought she was writing for her community and perhaps didn't appreciate there are feelings of people that have to be considered. This caused a rift in the relationship with Mia and the rest of the community.

What I loved about *Beautiful Renegades* is that it captured the resilience of the dancers, their determination to go their separate way from the norm and make their own distinctive art. That doesn't change either—and that's the beauty of art. It's made by people who don't fit in or want to and want to go in another direction. It's made by

people who think that art can be made in all sorts of ways by people who say, “no, I think there is another way to do this.” I think most of all it’s that tenacity to follow one’s own dream and beliefs to make art that I loved about ***Beautiful Renegades***.

Comment. ***Beautiful Renegades*** is a terrific piece; an homage to the pioneers of modern dance in Toronto and most of all to the spirit and artistry of Peggy Baker.

The Theatre Centre presents:

Playing until: Oct. 2, 2022.

Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes (no intermission)

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Written by Michael Ross Albert

Directed by Eda Holmes

Concept, choreographic direction by Peggy Baker

Choreographic collaborators: Elizabeth Chitty

Margaret Dragu

Lily Eng

Louise Garfield

Johanna Householder

Jennifer Mascall

Set and costumes by Gillian Gallow

Lighting and video by Jeff Pybus

Sound and composition by Debashis Sinha

Cast: Sarah Fregeau

David Norsworthy

Erika Prevost

Jarrett Siddall

Shauna Thompson

Anne van Leeuwen