

## DANCE

# The Eloquent Innocence of Dancer Peggy Baker

BY SHANNON RUPP

**T**ell dancers that Peggy Baker will be performing at the Firehall Arts Centre on Thursday (September 12)—as part of the *Dancing on the Edge* series—and they begin talking about her in tones of respect laced with a touch of awe. It's little wonder. Baker

## DANCING on the EDGE

has the kind of résumé most dancers would give a considerable chunk of their lives for, and she gets the kind of reviews other artists only dream of.

Last February, the *Globe and Mail* called her “the most eloquent and graceful contemporary dancer Canada has ever produced”. The *New York Times* has raved about everything from her brilliance to her “shining, expressive innocence”.

Heady stuff for someone from Edmonton, Alberta.

On paper, the 38-year-old dancer seems to lead a charmed life, at least as far as her career is concerned. Baker was an unlikely candidate for the dance world. Although she was familiar with ballet, thanks to a balletomane mother, Baker's first meeting with dance didn't happen until she was 19 and studying to be an actor at the University of Alberta.

“I took a movement class with Patricia Beatty [of Toronto Dance Theatre].

I felt like I'd found my medium, the thing I was meant to be doing,” Baker recalls. “I discovered that my body loved to dance. Even now, I don't feel well when I'm not dancing.”

Baker followed Beatty back to Toronto Dance Theatre, where she trained, learning to improvise and create dance as well as perform. In 1974, she joined the newly formed Dancemakers; she later became a co-director of the company. In 1981, she became a featured dancer in New York with Lar Lubovitch's company, with which she stayed for eight years.

Baker considers Lubovitch the single greatest influence on her career. She was already 28 and a member of his company before she took her first ballet class—a necessity for understanding the work of a choreographer whose vocabulary includes equal mixtures of ballet and modern dance. But she credits Lubovitch with doing much more than polishing her technique. “I became an artist in his company,” she says simply. Lubovitch anticipated her talent and cast her as a soloist. However, in finding and honing her skill as a solo interpreter, he also drove her out of his company.

“I left because I felt if I were going to dance alone, I needed to choose everything about it,” Baker says. Now her repertoire includes commissions from choreographers like James Kudelka, Christopher House, and Annabelle Gamson (the dancer who is preserving Isadora Duncan's work).

But Baker's first foray into the world of the independent dancer wasn't as a soloist. Last fall, she danced with the



Tall, muscular, and an alumna of the respected Lar Lubovitch company, Peggy Baker is Canada's most acclaimed contemporary dancer.

high-profile White Oak Dance Project. The project, which was produced by Mikhail Baryshnikov and featured the work of choreographer Mark Morris, drew on the talents of eight “mature” (that is, more than 35 years old) dancers. Some critics jokingly referred to it as the “Geritol project”. But it gave Baker a chance to work with her old friend Morris—a former Lubovitch dancer—and to share a dance with one of ballet's best-known artists.

It would be hard to find two dancers more different than Baryshnikov and Baker: he's a small five-foot-seven and classically trained from childhood; she's a large, muscular five-foot-eight and trained in modern dance. Naturally, Morris chose to cast them in the same solo.

“It can be very uncomfortable to share a solo with anyone, but Misha went out of his way to help me. He was very generous. He always let me find my own way of doing the work.”

Although she enjoyed the experience, Baker feels the only way she can express herself now is as a soloist doing the work she chooses.

“I want to put forward dance as something humane. It's forgiving of our human frailty, and it really celebrates the diversity and the wonder of humanity,” she begins, and then pauses to apologize. “That sounds a bit grand,” she says, and begins again. “I don't especially appreciate dance when it's used to separate the dancer from the audience by turning the dancer into a superperson or an ideal. I'm really much more interested in using dance to help people recognize their physical reality.” ■