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IN PERSON / *'It has to do with not trying to hide who you really are,' Peggy Baker says of her dance philosophy, 'and not trying to make things look perfect.'*

'Expressing values' through movement

PEGGY Baker, the most eloquent and graceful contemporary dancer Canada has ever produced, came to dance at a relatively late age. She was 19, a tall, big-boned kid from Alberta who wanted to be an actress. She took movement classes from Patricia Beatty, co-founder of Toronto Dance Theatre, and was smitten by what she calls an irrefragable desire to dance.

"I couldn't resist this urge I had, that I needed to be a dancer, and I'm lucky no one discouraged me," Baker says in a Toronto diner, her dark eyes crinkling as she smiles. "The whole thing was very potent. I understood it. Movement is very intelligible to me. It's something with which I feel I can express my own deeper motives, my own values."

A former member of Dancemakers in Toronto and the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company in New York, Baker is now concentrating on a solo career. She was recently seen across the United States as a member of the celebrated White Oak Dance Project, the company of mature artists performing a repertoire of original work by choreographic wunderkind Mark Morris.

Superstar Mikhail Baryshnikov fronted the troupe, but Baker stood in as his double in several pieces. Baker will perform one of them, *Ten Suggestions*, tomorrow night in Toronto as part of her appearance in the latest Danceworks show at the Betty Oliphant Theatre. Entitled *The Neo-Romantics*, the program will also feature New York dance artist Tere O'Connor. In addition to a work by Morris, Baker will present a premiere by another New York-based choreographer, Melissa Fenley.

"I started to get more involved in solo dance because at the end of my time with Lar Lubovitch (the last company with which she danced full-time), I began to feel I wasn't expressing my values," Baker says. "What are my values?" Here, she pauses a long time, her brow wrinkling beneath her geometric cut of straw-blond hair. "It has to do with not trying to hide who you really are, and not trying to make things look perfect," she ventures. "But it also has to do with the power of human movement when it's not being used to seduce, or overpower, or delude. It's about not idealizing or adoring the dancer and the form."

Baker is a remarkably honest performer. She brings clarity to everything she performs and a deep commitment to letting the dance speak for itself.

"As a soloist I don't put anything on the stage I don't believe in. That doesn't mean I don't make mistakes. It means it gives me the room to make those mistakes on myself."

That sense of freedom is essential for Baker, who is constantly on the go, teaching in Vancouver, Montreal, New York and Toronto. She is currently instructing students at the National Ballet School in Toronto. "A lot of my teaching is helping people just be themselves in dancing," she says.

Born in Edmonton, Alta., Baker, 39, grew up in a large family. Her mother taught tap dance and her father was involved in physical education. Her three brothers and two sisters did not follow her into dance, although one sibling is a photographer, one a musician and another works with ceramics.

She married her second husband, com-

poser and musician Ahmed Hassan, in Toronto in December and tries to adjust her work schedule to spend more time with him and his 13-year-old daughter. This means she will not tour with the White Oak Dance Project when it hits the road again in the spring. Her plans include staying in Canada to work on future solo engagements and working with other choreographers who share her dance values.

"I only work with people whose work I understand and feel I can do well," she says. "It's a wonderful process of discovery. I love that feeling of getting inside someone else's world, I love touching that. It's like going to another country."

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