

The Vancouver Sun

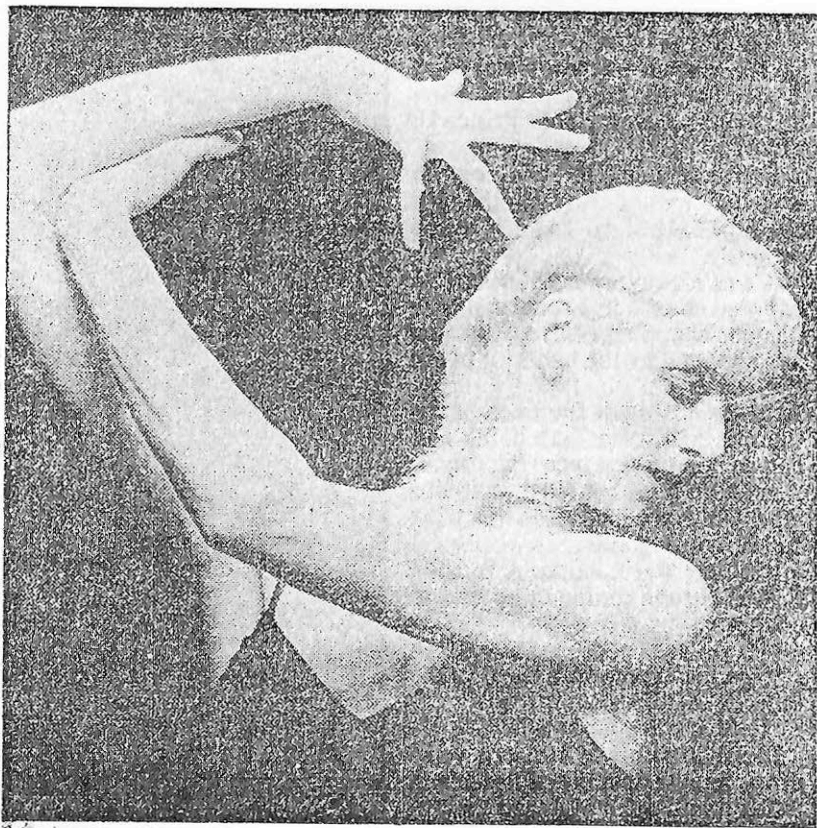
Baker's presence alone is a draw

Saturday, September 14, 1991

By MICHAEL SCOTT
Sun Dance Critic

PEGGY BAKER'S dancing credits are as striking as her forbidding, raw-boned presence on stage.

She has premiered more than 50 pieces of Canadian choreography, her own among them. She was a founding member, and later, director of the experimental Toronto collective Dancemakers. She danced with Lar Lubovitch's New York-based company for most of the 1980s, and last year she joined Mikhail Baryshnikov and Mark Morris in their much-touted White Oaks Dance Project.



DANCING ON THE EDGE

Day Nine: Peggy Baker performing works by Fortier, Fenley and Baker
Firehall Arts Centre, 280 East Cordova, until Sept. 14, multiple performances daily

Baker, whose presence here is a major draw for the Dancing on the Edge festival, bears the stigmata of long and intense dance experience — visibly powerful feet; toes bent sideways by *relevé* work; the concentration of a quivering greyhound; a body in which every muscle is controlled by act of will.

Baker scythes her movement from the air, her body a razor-sharp tool. The one piece of her own choreography she performed Thursday, Sanctum, epitomizes this vivid and hard-won way of dancing.

The work unfolds in pools of space — an oriental carpet for musician Ahmed Hassan (Baker's husband and collaborator) and a square of light, outlined with small wooden rods for Baker.

Hassan weaves a distinctly tribal fabric in which each sound is as much a participant as Baker herself. We begin in darkness with the rattle of a calabash, then the hiss of sticks being sliced through the air, the unsettling moan of a didgeridoo.

The movement is severe, angular, poses melting for a moment or two before slamming shut again. Later, the choreography takes on attitudes of manual labor, further enhancing Sanctum's Third World flavor.

In Molissa Fenley's Inner Enchantments, Baker becomes Jules Feiffer's leotarded dancer. Her ode here, though — set to the iterative musings of Philip Glass — is not to spring (as Feiffer might have told it), but to control. Baker holds every muscle in her body in thrall, her Grahamesque torso, the tightly coiling spring at its centre.

Yet all this tension is unexpectedly graceful, even flowing. Cramped on the Firehall's stage, Baker might well fill infinity, given the chance.