

ENTERTAINMENT

Arts

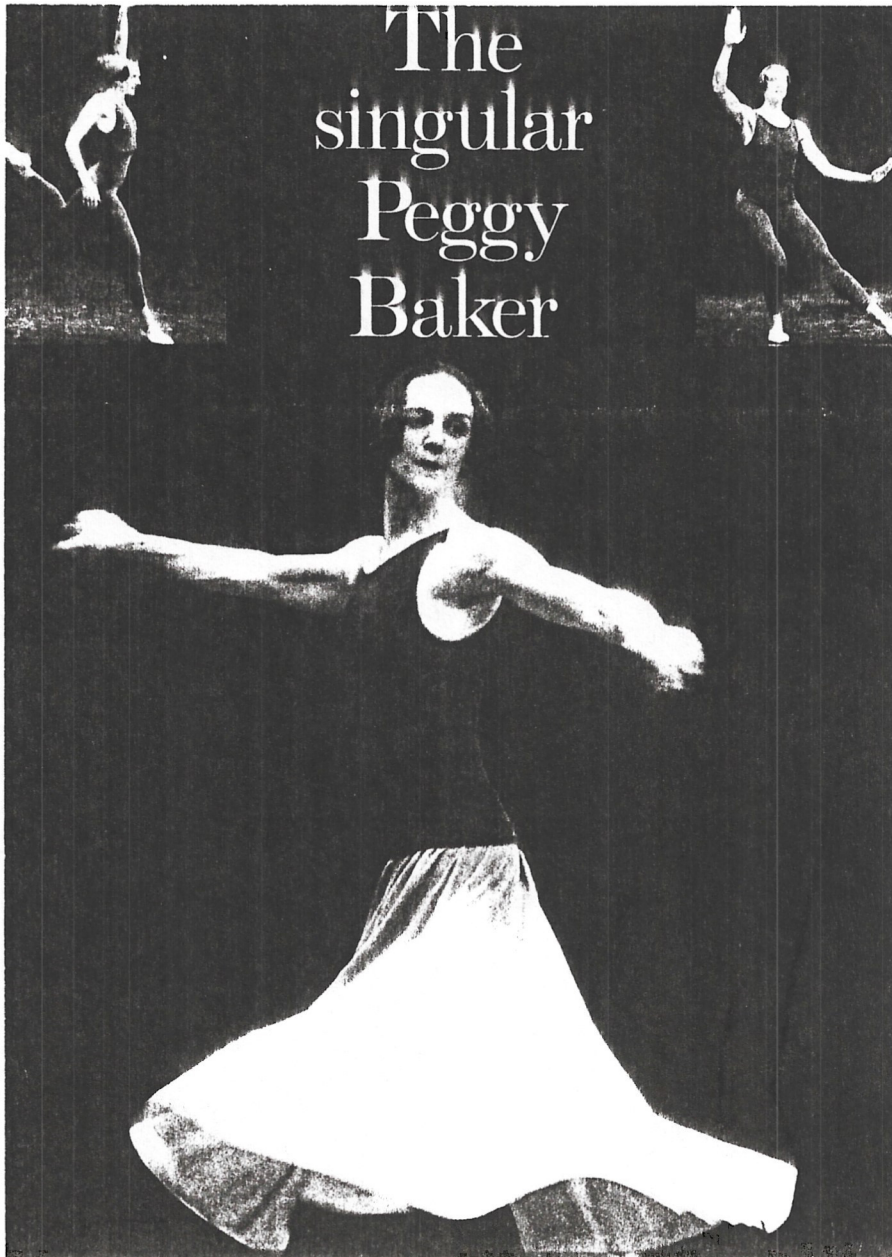
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ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

Fans love her theatricality and spirit

Her extraordinary arms rise swan-like as she moves into elegy mode for a new work, *Her Heart*. Then she's all angles and tight, jerky movement in a funky passage for *La vie de bohème*.

Peggy Baker turns dance into speech, a language as sweetly eloquent as anything you've ever heard.

When she opens her five night engagement at the Premiere Dance Theatre Wednesday, many in the audience will be awaiting her performance in a state of anticipatory awe.



The fabulous Baker girl of modern dance has built a solo career on her unique performance abilities combined with a choreographic vision that draws on all her theatrical talents.

If dance were a popularity contest, Peggy Baker would win it hands down.

"Technically, she's completely flawless. She can dance rings around anyone else. But that's not what makes her so exceptional. It's her individual spirit," says Susan Macpherson, who was one of her teachers when Baker arrived in Toronto from Edmonton at the advanced dancing age of 19.

Baker had been studying acting at the University of Alberta, when she encountered Patricia Beatty, co-founder of the Toronto Dance Theatre.

"I was just smitten. Once I saw modern dance I recognized something about me. Dance, I saw, could take theatre one step further into metaphor and physical poetry," said Baker in a recent studio conversation she illustrated with snatches of dances.

Baker's clear understanding of who, at 41, she is as a dancer and where she wants to go with it makes her an articulate and voluble performer and charismatic teacher.

"I don't know anyone in the dance community who doesn't adore her," says dance writer and CBC Radio arts producer Michael Crabb. Crabb once watched a Baker performance sitting beside prima ballerina Evelyn Hart, a dancer as accomplished in ballet as Baker is in modern dance.

"At the end she turned to me with tears in her eyes and said 'I wish I could dance like that,'" Crabb recalls.

Her apprenticeship at Toronto Dance Theatre in the early '70s led to Baker's charter membership in Dancemakers in 1974. Later she became its artistic director, premiering some 50 new Canadian works.

Although she studied on more than one occasion with modern dance pioneer Martha Graham, it was a desire to break out of the Graham-influenced mold that drew Baker to the New York company created by Lar Lubovitch. She danced with Lubovitch from 1981 to 1988.

"I was fascinated by the way he used people together. He could see everybody in a picture. And his reading of male and female bodies wasn't drawing a gender line. That was really appealing," Baker recalls.

Baker says she's taken back to moments in that company more and more now that she's teaching some of his works at the National Ballet School.

She left the company when Lubovitch was on one of his periodic swings toward ballet-derived work.

"I'm not a ballet dancer," says Baker simply. But it was also time for her to "live out more of my desires and my aesthetic."

Baker's return to Canada was like the recovery of a national treasure. Susan Macpherson, who also pursued a solo career after leaving the Toronto Dance Theatre, saw that Baker could go even further with it by choreographing her own pieces.

TDT artistic director Christopher House was one of the first to create dances for Baker. Partnered with her next week in a piece created by New York dancer Mark Morris, he's another unabashed fan.

"She's a very strong, very spiritual person. She approaches her work with just the right mixture of

controlled professional attention and artistic intuition," he says.

"She has a luminous quality to her. I don't usually speak so effusively, but she's a really unusual case."

Baker's solo performances, starting with her 1990 debut in the Festival of Canadian Modern Dance brought immediate praise for her dancing and her richly expressive explorations of womanhood. That same year she also toured with Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project.

"I didn't ever intend to be making my own things. Now it's become my *raison d'être*," laughs Baker.

When it came to creating her own works, Baker returned to her theatrical roots. The possibilities of stage space, lighting and architecture to create three-dimensional illusions started to drive Baker's imagination. "Dancing becomes more sculptured when you think of the whole theatrical environment. It's not just about line."

In *Sanctum*, a 1991 work that was partly a response to the death of Martha Graham, Baker began to explore those possibilities. She positioned a musician, her husband Ahmed Hassan, in one square of light while she performed in another. Dancing to the dry percussive sounds of indigenous instruments like the didgeridoo, Baker and the music become like two parts in a script about the self, separation and paring down to spiritual truths.

Lately, her creative impulses have been drawing her further and further toward music and the desire to create dances that integrate music and dance as if they were one medium.

Her Heart, what Baker describes as "my gift to my mother" is a new work she'll perform as a duet with piano. "Musicians are so beautiful to look at. Often during this dance, I leave and the pianist keeps on playing."

Another new work, *La vie de bohème*, was composed for her by her former husband Michael Baker. The dance is one line in a composition for clarinet, recorded sound and dancer. The choreographer's task was to interpret the geometry the composer laid out.

"Usually choreography is done by ear. This was totally with the eye. Some patterns I interpreted as floor parts and some as body shapes and movements. The effect was to be inside the music not on it.

"I want to keep working with music so that dancing becomes almost that effortless," Baker explains after demonstrating the way she's interpreted Michael Baker's ingenious score for dance. Indeed, in one of her solo pieces from 1992 choreographed to Brahms waltzes, Baker dances in such a way that the music seems to come from her.

"That's the highest compliment you could pay me," she says.

Maybe not, Grant Strate, director of the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser, has been following Baker's work since he started the dance program at York University. While one part of the modern dance world seems to be moving away from dance toward theatre or performance art, Baker, Strate believes, asserts "the intrinsic value of dance, how it has its own language with its own syntax."

Baker's dedication to the path of modern dance, says Strate, allows her to take creative risks others might falter with.

"She flirts with elements that could be naively embarrassing, but she treats them so elegantly it works."