

A litmus test of the body

IN PERSON / For Peggy Baker, the most magnetic and majestic modern dancer Canada has ever produced, movement is a 'first language,' an elemental and exuberant mode of expression.

BY DEIRDRE KELLY
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A FEW days after Christmas, Peggy Baker is back in the studio hard at work on a new show of solo dances that she will present at the Betty Oliphant Theatre starting Jan. 11. The stage is bare except for a string of lights on the floor at the back. After programming a tape of music, Baker takes her position in the half dark, legs together, arms hanging straight by her sides, head lowered as if in prayer.

When the spiral-like sounds of the Philip Glass score can be heard from the wings, Baker's body lifts, soars and ripples like a wind on the waves. The face that just before was still and reverent is now spangled with joy. The movement reverberates with the same happiness. And then that special thing happens that always happens when it is Peggy Baker dancing: the art and the artist become as one.

This Yeatsian observation of not being able to tell the dancer from the dance may seem a cliché, but each time she performs, Baker makes it seem strikingly fresh.

"I feel most in my element when dancing," the 43-year-old Alberta native says as she steps down from the stage to take a seat in the front row of the theatre where this impromptu rehearsal is taking place. She is slightly breathless and a ring of perspiration crowns her brow, but her words are clear and convincing.

"For me dancing is like a first language. I understand it and it makes perfect sense to me and it is so deeply satisfying."

BAKER, who is hands-down the most magnetic and majestic modern dancer Canada has ever produced, was relatively old when she discovered the art form that has come to give her life joy and meaning. Born Peggy Smith into a family of six children, she was 19 and a student of dramatic arts at the University of Alberta in Edmonton when she met Patricia Beatty, co-founder of the Toronto Dance Theatre. She was "smitten," she said, when she first saw modern dance.

And so she came to Toronto in 1971, shortly after marrying composer Michael J. Baker (they separated in 1983; she is now married to the Toronto percussionist Ahmed Hassan), to study with Beatty at TDT and with other notables in the Canadian modern dance scene, among them Susan Macpherson, Anna Blewchamp and Judith Marcuse. In 1974, she became a charter member of Dancemakers in Toronto.

In 1981, she moved to New York to join the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company. New York Times critic Anna Kisselgoff, who reviewed the Canadian dancer from 1981 to 1988 while she was with the company, has remarked that "audiences lost no time in noticing her." When in 1990 she joined Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project as a soloist, the attention increased. Annie Leibovitz photographed her. Mark Morris created works for her. "No one else dances with the same striking mix of formal severity,



Peggy Baker is 5 foot 7, but her presence on stage makes her seem larger than life. (FRED LUM/The Globe and Mail)

muscular force and strangely feminine allure," Kisselgoff concluded.

Baker returned to Toronto in 1991 to hone her skills as a solo dancer; she also became the first modern dance teacher and artist-in-residence at the National Ballet School. She started her solo dance career by curating evening-long programs for herself, using works by choreographers she admired but had never worked with before. They included New York's Melissa Fenley, Montreal's Paul-André and James Kudelka and Christopher House of Toronto. Gradually, she began to augment these annual programs of solo dances with works she created herself.

"I started out being curious about what I would do, and also I wanted to balance out people's perceptions of me," she said. "I remember in my very first show I felt like there was a lot of very dramatic work, and a lot of it was kind of moderate or slow in terms of tempo, and so I thought, 'I'm going to make myself a really fast, abstract dance,' because I noticed it was an area that wasn't being touched on by other people. And that was the impetus for the first piece I did [1991's *Sanctum*] ... I sort of thought of it as some sort of a litmus test, to make myself something each year just to see where I was at in my subcon-

scious. Because when you make these things, especially a solo for yourself, it's coming from sort of a mysterious place. Whatever conscious thought you're bringing to it, there's a whole other level that's pushing and pulling to bring certain things out."

For her coming show, called *Peggy Baker Solo Dance*, she will present two works of her own creation: *In a Landscape* and *Why the Brook Wept*. Both are set to scores by John Cage that pianist Andrew Burashko will perform live on stage, with Baker dancing in the foreground.

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The program also includes two pieces by the New York dancer and choreographer Molissa Fenley: *Inner Enchantments* and *Savanna*. Both works were created especially for Baker but are different from each other in terms of dynamic and spatial exploration.

"One of them [*Inner Enchantments*] only moves in curving lines the entire dance and the other [*Savanna*] is completely linear, you're always moving along a straight line. She has a lot of movements where I move straight toward the audience and straight back or straight across the front. The impact of that is really wild. In the first dance you're never

ever seen in profile and you're always moving along the curve. It's really quite a different look."

Baker gets up to illustrate the serpentine lines of the dance, and she looks as if she has grown suddenly from the lean and sinewy woman who was just talking moments before into an Amazonian with big-boned dynamism.

"People are always commenting that I'm *big*. But I'm not," she says. "I think that's my dancing. . . . I'm constantly told, 'Oh, you're so much smaller, I thought you'd be huge. I thought you'd be six feet tall.' I'm 5 foot 7. But people just have this idea of me being big because I move big. I take up a lot of space and I'm project-

ing my physicality."

Baker believes that her larger-than-life appearance on stage is part and parcel of the modern dance aesthetic, which, unlike the "presentational" art form of ballet, looks to make the dancer the primary focus:

"In modern dance, we treat *every* side of the stage equally, we don't just project to the proscenium, and we want to draw the audience in rather than to present. And ironically I think that when we have to do a bit more work that way, maybe it exaggerates the whole thing and makes us seem bigger than we are."

Though her mind is full of ideas on dance, she is not what you'd call a dance purist. "I think that dance is a

form of music," she said. "It's a visual line of music and its power lies in it being seen live."

Even when her dancing seems abstract, or at least self-referential, Baker said her work has a dramatic purpose. "I think dynamic and shape are elements of character, and partly what I'm trying to do with my solo work is to zoom in on each dance as if I were playing a different character . . . I'm wanting to be less neutral as a dancer and to bring the essence of a piece out more completely. It's a process of taking things away and refining, always refining."

Peggy Baker dances Jan. 11-13 at the Betty Oliphant Theatre in Toronto. Performances start at 8 p.m.