

THE ARTS

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PEGGY BAKER EXPLORES HER CREATIVITY IN

SOLO WORKS

Peggy Baker performs

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CALGARY HERALD

Peggy Baker, one of Canada's prima modern dance artists, recently made a pilgrimage to Vancouver to see Bob Dylan, Van Morrison and Joni

she has frequently collaborated with Burashko, whose piano is as prominently placed on the stage as her own body.

Dancing alongside a live musician, says Baker, offers the audience a uniquely nuanced live experience, or, as she puts it, "an event that's never duplicated."

"I'm adding a visual line or a visual context for the music," she says. "People hear it

Mitchell — all singer-poets in their 50s.

"I'm a huge Joni Mitchell fan," says the fortysomething dancer/choreographer.

"It's really beautiful to hear how she keeps evolving, and how she stays really true to herself. She's acting her age — she's not still trying to be 25 years old....

"She has kept growing and changing.

PREVIEW

■ Music for Piano and Solo Dancer, performed by Peggy Baker and Andrew Burashko, presented by Dancers' Studio West, Sunday at 8 p.m. at the Max Bell Theatre, Centre for Performing Arts. Tickets \$18 to \$25 (plus service charge) through TicketMaster.

The Globe and Mail has called Baker "the most magnetic and majestic modern dancer Canada has ever produced." University of Calgary dance professor Anne Flynn, who was honored to have Baker give a lecture-demonstration on campus on Friday, describes her as "the Karen Kain of modern dance."

Born and raised in Edmonton, Baker enrolled at the University of Alberta to study acting, but fell in love with contemporary dance, dropped out and moved to Toronto in 1971.

She performed with Toronto's Dancemakers in the 1970s, and with New York's Lar Lubovitch Dance Company throughout most of the 1980s.

In 1990, she was asked by celebrated choreographer Mark Morris to be one of the original nine members of the White Oak Dance Project, his modern-dance collaboration with Mikhail Baryshnikov. Working with these superstars was "amazing," but as a mature dancer Baker was feeling an urge to perform and create alone.

"It's interesting," she says, "because through my whole career choreographers had wanted to use me as a soloist anyway. I guess there's something about me that didn't ever quite fit in — a kind of individuality that I just could not subvert. I spent a long time trying to erase that difference... and now I'm just exploring it as fully as I can."

After a few months with White Oak, Baker returned to Canada and launched herself as a soloist, performing her own creations as well as dances by choreographers such as the National Ballet's James Kudelka. Since 1991,

For me, what she's doing is not about perfection, it's about authenticity. That's why she's a big hero of mine as an artist."

Many in the international dance world would pay similar compliments to the Toronto-based dancer, who gives her first-ever solo performance in Calgary on Sunday at the Max Bell Theatre, teamed with concert pianist Andrew Burashko.

differently by virtue of the contrast and resonance I'm creating."

In Calgary, Baker and Burashko will perform three of Baker's dances, and Burashko will round out the program with one solo piano piece.

Brute, danced to Prokofiev's Sonata No. 6, is about "man's leaning toward brutality" and is partly inspired by Guernica, Picasso's painting of the 1937 bombing of a Spanish town, the first mass bombing of an urban community.

In A Landscape, set to music by John Cage, "sounds like the musical equivalent of a Zen garden" and expresses the point of view that each of our lives unfolds in a personal landscape that frames our experience.

Why The Brook Wept, to a Cage composition called Ophelia, is a dance study of that character from Shakespeare's Hamlet. "Her death by drowning went pretty much unmourned in the play, except that she was described as falling into a weeping brook," says Baker.

"So I'm wanting to put forward a couple of ideas there. First, the idea that Nature is not unmoved by human tragedy... Also, it has to do with a lament over the fact of misogyny."

Baker is five feet, seven inches tall, but throughout her career she has been described as a large

dancer.

After watching her perform, people often expect her to be six feet tall. "It's an illusion that's created by the way I move," she says.

When ballet students see her give demonstrations at the Artist in Residence School, where she is artist in residence, "I hear from the kids that I dance like a boy, because they're

training in an idiom where the movement quality is very gender-specific. I don't buy into the stereotypical idea about how women should move....

"I have kind of an androgynous appearance in some of my work, and sometimes I just want to go into what I call my 'creature body,' which has nothing to do with gender."

Shortly after her Calgary performance, Baker goes to New York to take part in 40 Up, a show featuring dance artists who are over age 40. Like Joni Mitchell, she is exploring her maturity and making new discoveries, like the ones she has unearthed while rehearsing the piece Brute, which she hasn't danced for about three years.

"It's been very interesting to bring myself to it as an older dancer. Surprisingly, I feel like I'm doing it better than I ever did it before, even though I had greater physical resources (in the past). I feel like something else is coming out through this work that I understand at a deeper level."

