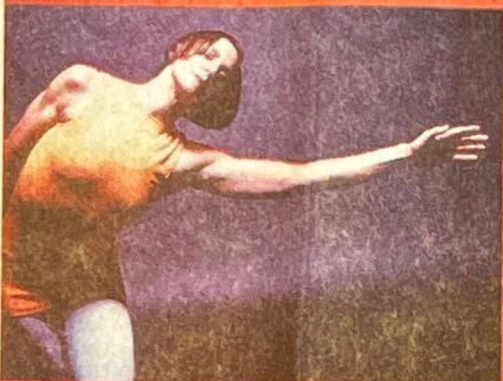


# A rare pairing

*Dance St. Louis commissions two well-known soloists to work together for the Ovation! series*

BY PAUL HAMPEL  
Of the Post-Dispatch



Peggy Baker is a fan of classics, adapting her creations to works by Bach, Chopin, Liszt and, occasionally, modern avant-gardists such as John Cage.

Attempts to combine two or more great but disparate artistic talents for the purpose of creating a unified work of art are always dicey propositions. Pop musicians seem to be the most frequent culprits. Think back on the embarrassing results of the Bono and Frank Sinatra duets a few years back, or, more recently, the awkward combo of Dave Mathews and Mick Jagger stumbling over "Wild Horses" at the Trans World Dome last month.

No wonder Canadian modern dance trailblazer Peggy Baker hesitated when it was suggested that she combine her solo routine with that of another noted Canadian lone wolf, Margie Gillis.

"I was definitely nervous," said Baker, speaking from her home in downtown Toronto.

Baker and Gillis will perform "Solos and Duets" this weekend at the Edison Theater at Washington University. The

shows are part of the theater's 25th-anniversary Ovation! series and are co-sponsored by Dance St. Louis.

The performance represents a new twist for the veteran performers. As solo artists, Baker and Gillis have challenged critics around the world to find ad-

jectives to capture their talents — luminous, voluptuous, quicksilver, flamelike.

So, what prompted the acclaimed solo recitalists to risk having their styles collide on stage?

"This came from Laura Burkhart's

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## "Solos and Duets"

**Who:** Peggy Baker and Margie Gillis featured in Ovation! series, with Dance St. Louis as co-sponsor

**Where:** Edison Theatre at Washington University, Mallinckrodt Center, 6445 Forsyth Boulevard

**When:** 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

**How much:** \$23

**Info:** 935-6543, 534-6622 or 534-1111

# Dance

## *Soloists Baker, Gillis combine in Edison show*

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brain waves," Baker said, referring to Dance St. Louis' director of marketing and operations. "We had been invited to do this before on numerous occasions but never with such a generous spirit."

Dance St. Louis agreed to the pair's request to choose the whole program, pick their own artistic adviser, and even bring along their own lighting designers.

"Once we accepted the invitation, we had to ask each other, 'How are we going to do this?'" Baker said with a hearty laugh that indicated the scope of the exhilarating, but problematical, challenge.

The dancers are, after all, studies in contrast. Baker, 45, with a tall, athletic frame and short-cropped hair, mixes stringent formality with muscular power. She's a fan of classics, choreographing in silence and then adapting her creations to works by the likes of Bach, Prokofiev, Chopin, Liszt and, occasionally, modern avant-gardists such as John Cage.



**Peggy Baker, who will team with Margie Gillis at the Edison.**

Baker gives her longtime collaborator, pianist Andrew Burashko, equal billing, placing his instrument at center stage. ("Andrew isn't just my accompanist," she says, "He's my dance partner.")

Gillis, 44, has been soloing for more than 20 years. That she introduced modern dance to China in 1979 says a lot about her adventurous

spirit. Gillis is all emotion and has acknowledged that she hears "voices." Her movements are as lithe and sweeping as the shaft of her trademark hip-length auburn hair, which she uses to dramatic effect. Sophistication is sacrificed as Gillis backflips, tumbles and swoops, often to pop tunes by Leonard Cohen and Sinead O'Connor.

"Even our warm-ups are at odds," Baker said.

"I do a serious technical, rigorous warm-up and she rolls around on the floor and gets in touch with herself."

After a few rehearsals that Baker described as "pieces of heaven," the pair decided upon a couple of duets in which each would experiment with the other's style.

"I think the audience will find it to be a wonderful marriage of forms," she said.

Unlike Gillis, Baker comes from a repertory background. She helped found Toronto's Dancemakers before joining New York's Lar Lubovitch Dance Company in the early 1980s. Then, Mikhail Baryshnikov asked her to join his White Oaks Dance Project in 1990. After one season, she decided to make a clean cut with repertories.

"I gained a decade's worth of experience in one season with those people," she said. "But I realized that Mikhail created that company to fulfill his own tremendous needs to keep growing, acknowledging to himself his age, his ability and his need for fresh stimulation. I came to the same conclusion about myself. I knew going solo meant I wouldn't be staying in fabulous hotels anymore, or flying in a private plane with our own orchestra; but that's not the world I want to create."

Baker is accustomed to setting her own limits. But there is one vital aspect of her life that is beyond her control. Her husband, composer Ahmed Hassan, suffers from an aggressive form of multiple sclerosis.

"It makes me so grateful that I am able to still speak in the language

that I feel most eloquent in," she said. "It is so hard for Hassan to be torn away from making music. He was able to express himself in a singular way through his playing, and nothing can make up for that loss."

Hassan's disease has helped Baker come to terms with the inevitability of aging and to be more forgiving about her body and its limitations. At an age when many dancers retire, Baker is expanding her repertoire.

"I realize that nothing can match the virtuosic ability of a 25-year-old with great technique and intuitive ability. But likewise, nothing compares to an older dancer who really knows what she wants to say and how to say it."

Baker believes that she is at the forefront of a dance revolution in which better training and physical therapy have extended the careers of artists — and opened the door to exciting potential that will ultimately enrich modern dance as never before.

"Dance is not just boy-meets-girl anymore," she said. "What we're seeing now is a much broader expression spread over a much broader time frame. Companies like Mark Morris', in which half the company is 40 and up, are part of a huge new push that is going to leave a huge legacy for generations to look forward to."

Unfortunately, that ability to keep going at an advanced age doesn't apply to the arts in general, Baker said.

"The arts are in trouble throughout North America. We have a very poor record in educating our children to attend the arts. We think taking our children to tap lessons fulfills the obligation, but nothing can replace the value of watching adult professionals perform.

"Our society is crying out for deeper fulfillment, and we think we can placate that spiritual emptiness with television. But it's not too late. There are some wonderful works being created, but if we don't support them they will disappear."