

# Baker offers up dance in thanks

## BALLET SCHOOL TRIBUTE

BY MICHAEL CRABB

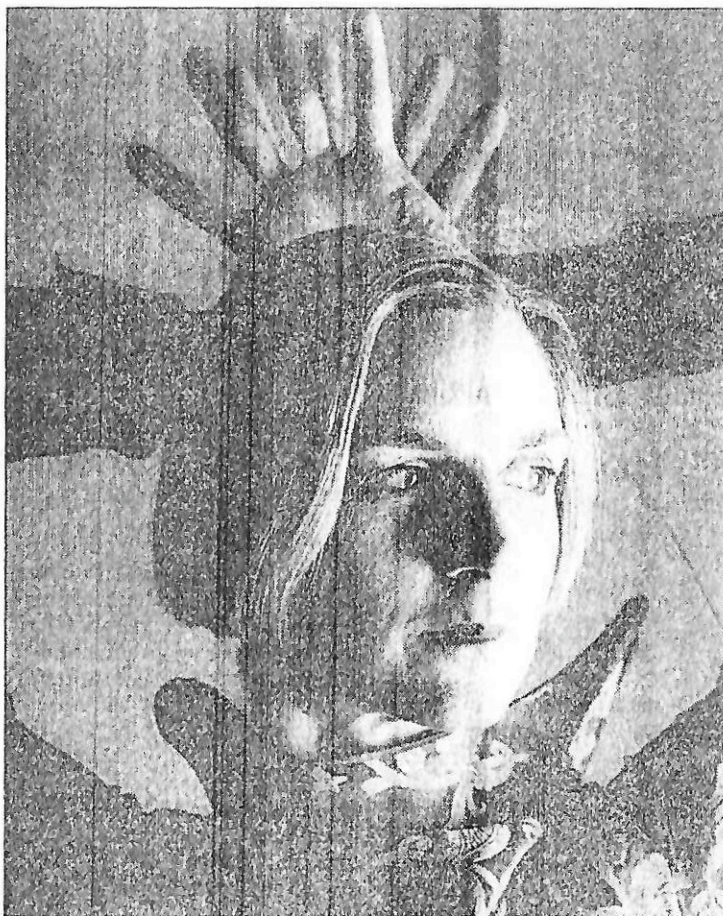
Peggy Baker has decided the best way to say "Happy Birthday" to an institution she loves and respects is to dance for it. So, from today to Saturday, Ms. Baker will present a program entitled *Words Fail* at The Betty Oliphant Theatre, named for the founding principal of the National Ballet School, which this season is celebrating its 40th anniversary.

"This is my theatre," says Ms. Baker. "This is where I work. I was an outsider and I've been given a home here. I planned this show specially as my way of saying thank you."

Ms. Baker, 47, was very much an outsider when she began to teach at NBS a decade ago. She made her name internationally, not through the refined medium of classical ballet, but by becoming a brilliant exponent of barefoot modern dance — an anarchic, iconoclastic, anti-elitist form that sprang up in the early years of the 20th century.

Traditionally, modern dancers viewed the ballerina's cramped toe shoe as a symbol of tyranny and artificiality, her frilly tutu as proof of the form's inherent decadence. The great divide has narrowed a good deal since the mud-slinging days of the modern-dance pioneers. Ballet choreographers have discovered the visceral, emotive power of modern dance with its acceptance of gravity and understanding of the solar plexus as a motivational core. The modernists have learned that ballet has a few lessons of its own to teach about body placement and co-ordination.

Even so, the way NBS — alma mater of Veronica Tennant, Karen Kain, Frank Augustyn and other



Peggy Baker, a modern dance soloist, helped break down barriers to classical ballet as an artist-in-residence at the National Ballet School.

Canadian classical ballet icons — has embraced the modernist Baker is exceptional. Although technically she remains a part-time teacher, Ms. Baker was given the title artist-in-residence seven years ago to reflect the depth of her involvement. She was brought to NBS in 1989 by artistic director Mavis Staines, who knew that exposure to modern dance would be crucial to a new generation of ballet dancers. "Peggy may be best known to the public as a dancer and choreographer," says Ms. Staines, "but the way she imparts her knowledge and opens the students to a process of self-discovery represents teaching at its finest."

Ms. Baker is equally fulsome in her praise of Ms. Staines' work at NBS, particularly in exposing it to fresh influences. She says her upcoming program, which includes collaborations with, among others, actor Jackie Burroughs, cellist Shauna Rolston and visual artist Ina Levitsky, is itself a symbolic tribute to Ms. Staines' ecumenism.

Although Ms. Baker, a longtime former member of the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company in

New York, is now best known as a solo dancer, two of the four works on her current program are duets and only one of the solos is for her.

The other is the Toronto premiere of *Yang*, an acclaimed solo she choreographed in 1998 for the Vancouver-based dancer Sylvain Brochu. Ms. Baker will be partnered by New Yorker Larry Hahn in Doug Varone's *In Thine Eyes* — a big hit when she and Mr. Varone performed it in Toronto last year — and by Ms. Burroughs for another Varone creation, *The Volpe Sisters*.

As for the program's overarching banner, taken from her own solo, *Words Fail*, Ms. Baker says all four works, however abstract some may seem, express human characters and situations whose emotional essence can only be conveyed through movement. "In the end," she says, "it's a statement about how important dance is."

■ Peggy Baker Dance Projects presents *Words Fail* at the Betty Oliphant Theatre, 404 Jarvis St., Toronto, today to Saturday at 8 p.m. Call 416-504-7529.

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