

# From a dance icon, an intimate view

## Peggy Baker's new work draws audience inside

BY MICHAEL CRABB

Theatre artists have always had a love/hate relationship with the proscenium arch. It creates an emphatic barrier between audience and performer that, while offering many technical advantages in terms of stage effects, can also rob a performance of intimacy. It explains why actors often prefer to work on open or thrust stages and why many contemporary dancers opt to perform in a studio setting.

Peggy Baker has decided to tackle the issue differently. For her upcoming Toronto season, Baker, at 48 an iconic figure in Canadian modern dance, won't be quitting the National Ballet School's traditionally configured Betty Oliphant Theatre. Instead she's inviting the audience to join her onstage. Baker is calling her evening of solo dance *Interior View*.

"I've always enjoyed watching people dance in the studio," says Baker during a break from her day job as the National Ballet School's artist-in-residence. "I wanted to give people that intimate view"; except Baker's audience will see more than the dance. Seating for about 60 people will arc across the back of the Betty Oliphant Theatre's huge stage, giving the audience a performer's perspective, complete with stage manager, technical crew and elaborate, normally concealed lighting equipment. Even the traditional masking curtains that hide the wings will be gone. To emphasize her point, Baker has arranged for audience members to be led backstage via the empty auditorium.

Her novel seating arrangement forces a new kind of communication between artist and audience. A proscenium effectively establishes a voyeuristic relationship, with the audience observing as if through a window. Baker is making the audience complicit in the act of creation. "They will know I can see them. Everyone's going to feel a tiny bit on the spot." She's also playing with her audience's sense of perspective. For example, there will be two pianos onstage. One will seem far away, perched on the theatre's orchestra pit, which will be elevated to stage level. At some points in the show, Baker will have the front curtain lowered, shutting off the view of the empty theatre and creating a more intimate space.

Baker will not be the only performer onstage. She is one of that laudable group of purists who believe that dance should be performed to live music. Baker takes this a step further by seeking out creative collaborators rather than simply accompanists.

Among these have been that fine Canadian cellist Shauna Rolston, the Amici ensemble, percussionist Debashis Sinha and Baker's own husband, Ahmed Hassan, tragically disabled by multiple sclerosis.

Her most frequent and consistent collaborator, however, is concert pianist Andrew Burashko. Baker has been working with Burashko almost since she launched her solo career and he is an integral part of *Interior View*.

As an orchestral soloist and chamber musician, Burashko is used to having other people at close quarters. Even so, he admits he had reservations when Baker proposed putting the audience onstage. "I didn't know quite what to think about it." But now he's comfortable with the idea of giving people a close-up view of the partnership he and Baker have developed over the past decade.

Burashko is a mesmerizing performer in his own right. There is a freshness to his playing that complements perfectly the sharp, emphatic movement of Baker's tall, lithe body. It's also clear the two have a deep respect for each other.

"It's built up over time," says Baker. "Traditionally in dance you spend so much time trying to recreate someone else's performance. I've learned a different way of working from Andrew.

"First, you address the technical and structural elements, the givens, then you explore the possibilities of interpretation."

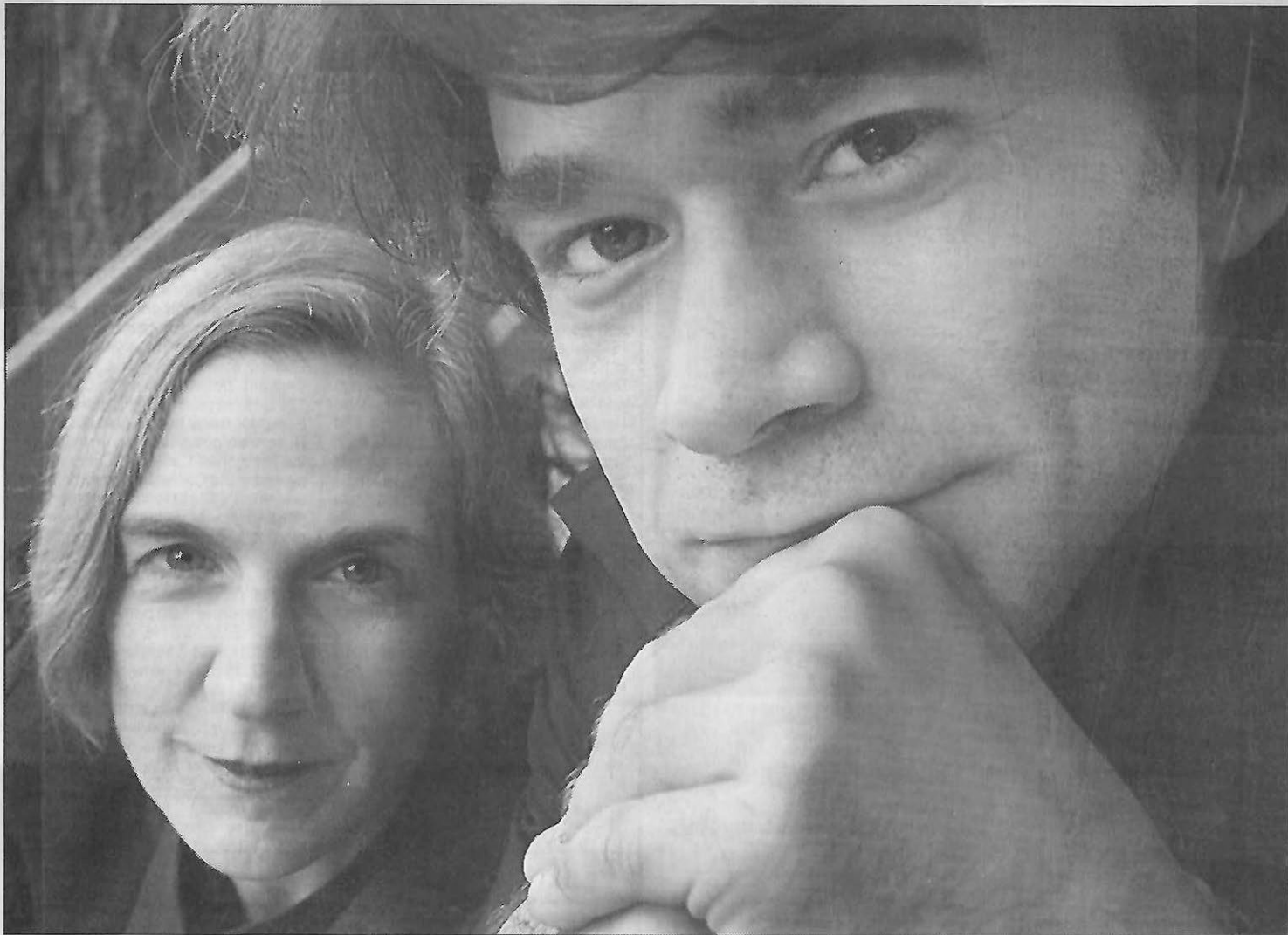
For his part, Burashko is able to feed off Baker's intuitive understanding of the music. "The real core of our relationship is hard to describe, but Peggy's understanding of the structural and rhythmic aspects of a piece of music is remarkable. She definitely inspires me and informs my interpretation."

The rapport onstage between Baker and Burashko is so intense people often assume they're a couple. Baker, who is still grieving the tragically premature loss to leukemia of her first husband, composer Michael J. Baker, admits there are advantages to having a strikingly handsome younger man as her artistic partner. "I find him attractive in every single way and it's good to be working with someone from a different generation." Offstage they banter like siblings. "We have a nice relationship," says Burashko. "He's sometimes moody and intense," says the normally serene Baker, "but we've lived through a lot together."

■ Peggy Baker Dance Projects presents *Interior View* at the Betty Oliphant Theatre, 404 Jarvis St., Toronto, Nov. 9-11, 14-18 at 8:30 p.m. and Nov. 12 and 19 at 4 p.m. Tickets: (416) 504-7529.

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**Dancer Peggy Baker and concert pianist Andrew Burashko, her most frequent and consistent collaborator. “She definitely inspires me and informs my own interpretation,” Burashko says of Baker, the star of Interior View.**