

# Raising the barre

She's performed solo and in troupes, at home and abroad, in works created by others and works she made for herself. At 48, Peggy Baker is a legend in contemporary dance, a perpetual motion machine who thinks best-before dates are best ignored

**DON'T BOTHER TALKING TO PEGGY BAKER** about whether she's a modernist or a postmodernist. "I don't like labels," she says, waving them away with a sweep of her extraordinarily long, elegant arms, somehow frowning and grinning at once. A legend in the world of contemporary dance, she appears almost always in motion, even when seated. This potential for movement isn't just physical: it seems spiritual and intellectual as well, the pursuit of a self-definition to keep pace with her inquiring restlessness. Whenever she seems to have come to rest, she's already looking for a choice that moves her on.

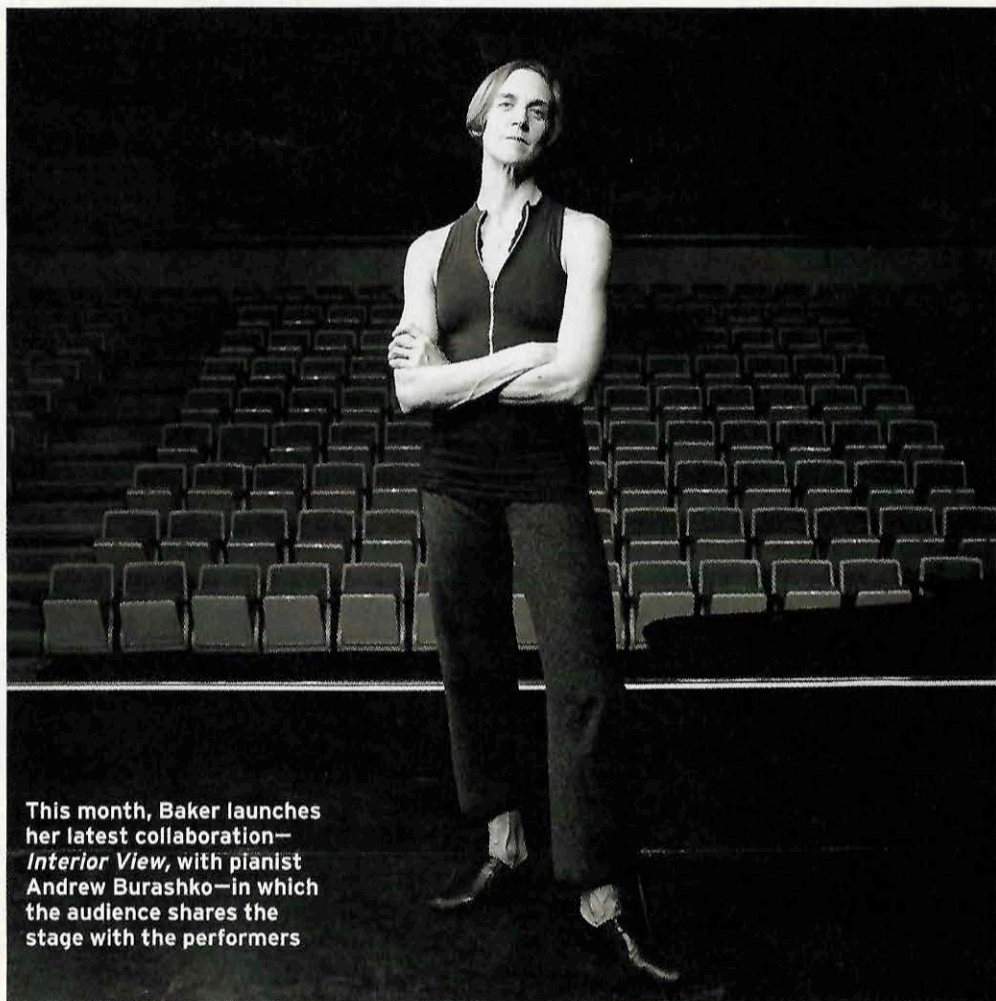
Ten years ago, Baker came back to Toronto from an enviable career in the United States—where she had been dancing with Mikhail Baryshnikov and Mark Morris—re-establishing herself in the city where in the 1970s she had first trained and made her presence felt. Since her return, she has been seen in a succession of nifty dance recitals, stylishly achieving the highest levels of performance. There is nobody quite like her on a stage. Her angular, expansively limbed body has an instinctive, almost involuntary expressiveness. If great singers are made memorable by a distinctive vocal timbre, then a great dancer like Baker possesses an immediately recognizable signature in her physicality. The power, swiftness and concentration of her movements seem natural emanations of a body that is part Giacometti sculpture,

part Picasso cubist portrait, but the physical flows from a sensibility that is focused, analytic, curious. Peggy Baker starts with a big serving of smarts.

This new Toronto period has been both a summation—Peggy Baker is 48 and knows the received wisdom about a dancer's best-before date—and a renewal. She has performed works created for her, and works she made for herself. She has danced solo, and danced in collaborations with strong artists from other disciplines: the actor Jackie Burroughs, the cellist Shauna Rolston, the percussionist De-

bashis Sinha, the musicians of the Amici ensemble and, most rewarding, the concert pianist Andrew Burashko. On November 9, she and Burashko will perform a program called *Interior View* at the Betty Oliphant Theatre.

**FOR ALL HER STATUS AS A BIG-CITY MULTI-**cultural, multinational, multidisciplinary, multimedia dance goddess, Baker began as an Alberta girl by the name of Peggy Smith, dancing in her parents' Edmonton living room. Her grandparents had run a boarding school with a fair arts



This month, Baker launches her latest collaboration—*Interior View*, with pianist Andrew Burashko—in which the audience shares the stage with the performers

**ARTS** continued

component, and her mother was accomplished in tap. "It was the dancing of her generation," says Baker with due historic reverence. There were six children, all of whom took tap and piano and art classes. "I just thought this was part of childhood," she adds. "We would put on shows at home, in that archway between the living room and the dining room that was like a theatrical proscenium arch." Many stage careers have had their origins in that magic imaginative space, transformations surely unanticipated by the builders of these middle-class homes. Years later, when Baker had her own apartment painted, she asked that its archways be highlighted as prosceniums.

As a teenager in the mid-1960s, she won a \$75 acting prize in the Edmonton public school drama competition, which allowed her to attend an annual summer theatre seminar in Drumheller. The guest teacher of movement for actors was Patricia Beatty, who, herself on the verge of being a founding member of Toronto Dance Theatre, brought out the gospel of modern dance. "Trish Beatty showed me a world of theatre and dance folded into one another," remembers Baker, "and she spoke a language I wanted to hear and believe and live in."

By the fall of 1971, at the age of 19, she had dropped out of the acting program at the University of Alberta and married the musician and composer Michael Baker ("my first boyfriend, a complete soul-mate"). Together they travelled east. "We both came to Toronto to become artists in this milieu," is how she touchingly recalls their resolve. (Michael Baker died of leukemia this past September.) It was a frantic and explosive time for her, suddenly immersed in a new community of artists and musicians. She juggled banal part-time jobs and two or three daily dance classes ("\$50 a month bought you as many classes as you could take," she laughs), as well as the force field of the mentor personalities at the Toronto Dance Theatre, including, in addition to Beatty, David Earle and Peter Randazzo. "It was a very powerful time," Baker says now, "but it wasn't my own world, even though I was fascinated by it and appreciated the stimulation, all the pushing and pulling. These people were very sophisticated, and I grew up in the suburbs of Alberta! I was really out of my depth culturally. I took so deeply to heart everything they said, and it was way, way too much, too powerful. I was overboard with my early training. I looked like I was more accomplished than I was: I looked like I

knew what I was doing. But I wanted more technique, more grounding, less 'magic.' I wanted to understand my physical life more fully."

Three years later, she had left TDT and was auditing dance classes at York University as well as travelling to New York to pursue other dance influences. The York connection led her to become a founding member—and later artistic director—of Dancemakers, an ensemble that emphasized equality among dancers. "We were teaching each other a lot," she says. "I was dancing with my peers." But this mixture of journeyman ventures and fleeting foreign forays didn't satisfy. It wasn't until 1980, when the 28-year-old Baker left Canada to join the Lar Lubovitch dance company in New York, that she felt she was truly beginning her professional life as a dancer and dancemaker.

The Lubovitch style, both in terms of the dancers selected for the company and the works presented, was wilfully eclectic, celebrating individuality over homogeneity. Baker recalls: "Lar drew freely from all the different dance forms: modern, ballet, ethnic, jazz, folk. The dance world was a kind of Esperanto we were all speaking." One of her contemporaries in the company was the dancer and choreographer Mark Morris, who would later

take the Lubovitch aesthetic and ratchet it up to genius in his own joyous creations. The dancers in the company remain Baker's closest friends and influences, "the key, key people." She's touched to this day by Lubovitch's commitment to his dancers. But as the seasons passed, she found herself growing wary. Lubovitch often singled her out for solos, which she felt excluded her from the group. In residencies at universities, he urged her to seize opportunities to create her own choreography—which she always took—but his encouragement perversely inflamed her paranoia about his regard for her as a dancer. Finally, she felt that their interests were diverging, that she was no longer the kind of dancer he wanted, that there wasn't enough mutual trust to continue. Yet there was a ruefulness in the parting: "We dancers carried his repertoire in our bodies for him, so it was difficult to decide to leave."

When she did leave, in 1989, she had no particular direction. She would concentrate on her teaching, a side career that she'd started 11 years earlier. "Teaching is how I subsidize myself," she admits plainly (she now teaches at the National Ballet School), "because dancing doesn't provide a living income." But she did plan one final farewell solo dance recital in New

York. "It was meant to be an accumulation of work by the people I admired," she says, listing them off: "Paul-André Fortier, Christopher House, James Kudelka, Doug Varone, Melissa Fenley. I thought I was going to feel so satisfied, that it was such a nice way to finish. I guess partly I grew up thinking that you danced until you were 35 or 40 years old, and then you must do something else."

**UNEXPECTEDLY, AFTER THE RECITAL AND** on the very doorstep of retirement, Peggy Baker was invited by Mikhail Baryshnikov to join his White Oaks Project, a small group of mature contemporary dancers he was putting together to challenge himself in his post-classical ballet career. Once again, Mark Morris was a member of the company, both as dancer and choreographer. "My year with White Oaks was just as important as my whole nine years with Lubovitch," she insists. She was able to dance with Baryshnikov, to work beside him and Morris in the studio, and to soak in the warm critical and professional attention that surrounds any project Misha undertakes. Nevertheless, the White Oaks experience also pointed her in the next direction she knew she had to go. Once again, it meant leaving. "It was a big

thing to have had a creative rapport with those people," she says, looking back to 1990, "but I came out of the White Oaks tour knowing that I wanted to do my own work. I didn't want to be in a company any more—not even that one. I knew that I needed, if I was really truthful with myself, to do what Mark and Misha were doing: make my own world around my own work."

Before she returned to Toronto, Morris gave her a going-away present: a dance of his called *Ten Suggestions*, which required a live pianist to play 10 bagatelles by Tchernepin. Morris's dances are always performed to live music—it was a principle of White Oaks as well—and this parting gift pushed her to search for an accomplished and receptive pianist. She asked around among musician friends (including Michael Baker, who was by this time her ex-husband), and one name turned up on several lists: the Russian-born, Canadian-trained Andrew Burashko, who was 24.

Although Baker has worked with an impressive array of non-dancing collaborators over this past decade, Burashko has endured longest as her most stimulating partner. Neither of them might have anticipated this from their first encounter. "At the beginning," she remem-

bers, "Andrew was very formal, very shy. He knew nothing about contemporary dance. He brought a metronome to the first rehearsal, because he assumed that the most important thing for me would be a correct and consistent tempo. He was surprised and pleased that it wasn't going to be like that."

Burashko, a bracing, electric musician with his own busy concert career—he will play Shostakovich's *First Concerto* with the Toronto Symphony in February—recalls his skepticism: "It was all very foreign. I was young and had a huge ego. I thought it was just an accompanist she wanted." Baker, of course, wanted much more—an independent-minded, powerful presence to challenge as much as to complement an artistic dialogue between equals.

Swept into her vision, Burashko began suggesting the music they would perform together. These days, their work begins by his giving her a CD (often someone else's performance) of the piece he has chosen for them, so she can hear the music; later he replaces this with a cassette of himself sight-reading through the music, so that she can intuit his approach. In these early stages, they work apart, each alone in a studio, developing interpretations of the music they will bring to one another at their first shared rehearsal, a mutual show and tell.

"It seemed incredibly easy to work with Peggy," says Burashko. "When we worked on Prokofiev's *Sixth Sonata*, for instance, some of her choreography was completely unexpected, but the essence fully reflected what I was doing, a physical manifestation of the inexpressible."

It may not be too fanciful to compare the way the youthful Rudolf Nureyev revived the mature career of Margot Fonteyn to the way that Burashko's influence has transformed Baker, who is almost 15 years his senior. She quickly moved him and his piano out of the orchestra pit and onto the stage beside her, limiting her dancing room but making their rapport more intimate and intense. Although he cannot watch her as he plays, they have discovered many ways in which to share their performances. He has had to make difficult accommodations to theatrical stage lighting, and in some pieces she has suggested to him subtle dramatic responses that might be integrated with hers.

Baker, of course, is always interested in going further. In the forthcoming *Interior View* program, she is bringing the public (which will be limited to 60-odd people at each show) onto the stage with the

performers. There, the audience will be even closer to Andrew Burashko's hard-breathing concentration as he heaves his way through two fabulously hard-nut composers, Scriabin and Cage, and even closer to Peggy Baker's emphatic physical presence. "We will all share the space together," she grins, now the impish mad scientist, "nothing will be obscured, and the source of everything will be revealed. The audience will be able to see the theatre as the dancer usually sees it."

Their collaboration has allowed them to see themselves in different ways, too. "I am inspired by, and in awe of, Peggy's intellect and her ability to articulate fully every aspect of her dancing," says Burashko. "She is so attuned to shifts and changes. If we leave something and come back to it two years later, I won't notice how my interpretation has changed—for me it's different all the time even if I don't consciously try something new—but she will point it out to me, and it will excite her. It's wonderful to have a mirror for what I do."

Baker has her own changed perspective: "The very last thing a musician wants to do is give someone else's performance. In dance, very often, we recreate how so-and-so first did it. It's so limiting. It's like what happens when you dance to recorded music: it cuts off a whole level of stimulation, and leaves you the only one making the choices. When I dance with a live musician, with Andrew or Shauna, my response is truly inspired by what's just happened."

**IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE TO IMAGINE THAT** Peggy Baker's art commands an audience equal in measure to its importance. The audience for contemporary dance in Toronto is small—it has been estimated at no more than 5,000, max—and there are many artists and groups vying for attention. Tour bookings elsewhere are also hard to get. Though Baker and Burashko will also perform briefly in New York and Ottawa this season, and she herself will tour *loin, très loin*—an hour-long solo created for her by Paul-André Fortier—to Edmonton and Quebec, it's not much of a schedule, and she hasn't toured Europe for years.

She appears frustrated ("I think it's great work that will take people somewhere, and I'm heartbroken when it's not seen") and yet also resigned. She has her work to do. With even this powerful body aging, she knows her topics. Baker is interested in themes of gender, androgyny and ambiguity. (Part of her problem with Lubovitch, she says, was his predictable

way of putting a woman onstage. In the White Oaks company, she and Baryshnikov shared certain roles.) She is dismayed that at the National Ballet School, boys and girls usually train separately. She wants neither gender nor concepts of peak physical capability always to be the issues in dance.

Baker becomes still and quiet. She is thinking of Ahmed Hassan, her second husband, a gifted composer, a superlative percussionist and an energetic, bright-eyed presence who has, over the past decade, become disabled by MS. His health is surely another reason she is prepared, uncharacteristically, to stay put. She has so little time for herself at home (they live in an artists' co-op near Spadina and College) that she sustains that self with her time alone in the studio. Life has presented a cruel irony that would be overstated in fiction: a person whose life has been committed to shaping movement is bonded, heart and soul, with one who's losing control of movement. Yet they resist despair.

"Ahmed has had a big impact upon me," she says softly, looking down at her own body, "in helping me to see how little it takes to be extremely expressive or communicative. To see that it's also possible in dancing. To see that we don't have to be complete. I reject this idea that in dance you should quit when you're not in your physical prime, as if there's nothing else you could say or do. Why should I withhold? It's as if I should be ashamed to show you what my body looks like. I think it's important for us to listen to the body speaking—children and young people and young adults, and people in their glory years, and people in the throes of middle age and further. There's so much poetry at every time in our lives that's so well spoken by us at that moment. We can't cut off what we need to say."

Peggy Baker's need to say—her need to articulate a balance between past and present, tradition and risk, obligation and independence, and to integrate these with the world of her dance and the world of Ahmed and the world of Andrew's music—has led her to unexpected choices. "As I've found with every good choice I ever made," she says, "they haven't been, ever, an end in themselves: they've always been the beginnings of things I never imagined." This openness gives her work an illumination, a questing embrace outward, but never completion, never perfection. "This idea of perfection," she says with a hearty laugh that recalls the Alberta girl, "I don't go for it at all. It doesn't lead anywhere." ■