



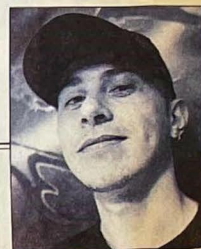
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Superlative in motion

Top dancer Peggy Baker heads for NAC

BY ANDREA ROWE

Not all great artists become household names: if they did, then Peggy Baker's name would trip off the tongue as easily as Karen Kain's.

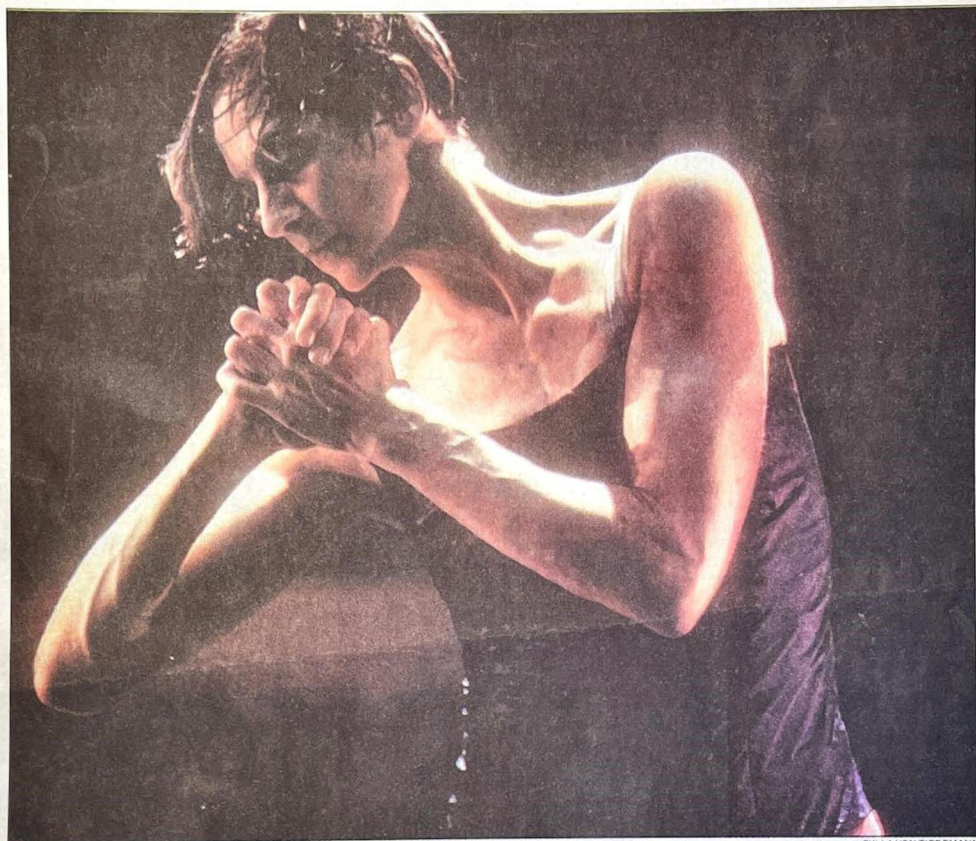
Baker, who brings her program *Pas Seule* to the stage of the National Arts Centre Theatre Tuesday evening, may remain relatively unknown to the Canadian public because she spent almost a decade in New York becoming known for her "superlative dancing," to quote Anna Kisselgoff of the *New York Times*. For many years she was with Lar Lubovitch's dance company there, performing his complex, demanding choreography and touring internationally. Later, she was invited by Mark Morris to dance with co-founder Mikhael Baryshnikov in the prestigious White Oak Dance Project, an amazing opportunity for any dancer.

Yet it was during her year with White Oak that Baker realized it was time to leave the relative security of the company structure and come home. While other dancers of her generation were retiring, starting families or devoting themselves to teaching, Baker, at the ripe old age of 38, decided she wanted to keep dancing, but on her own terms. She moved back to Toronto, married composer and musician Ahmed Hassan, and began to build a career as a solo artist.

What does that mean exactly? As artistic director of Peggy Baker Dance Projects, Baker now takes charge of every detail of her company's operations: she decides who to commission, when to focus on her own creations, which engagements to accept, who will design the lighting and costumes, and how much she can safely take on.

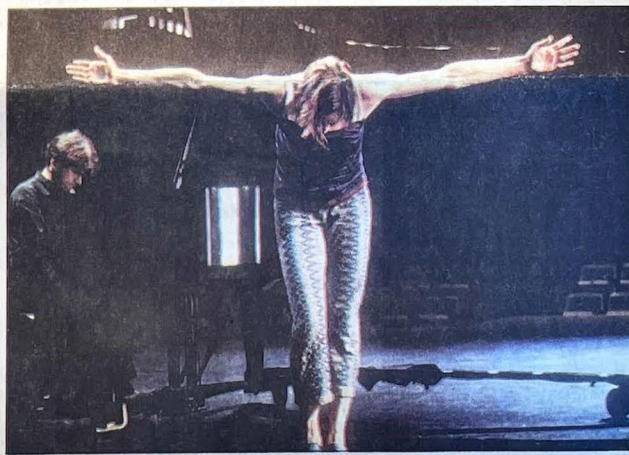
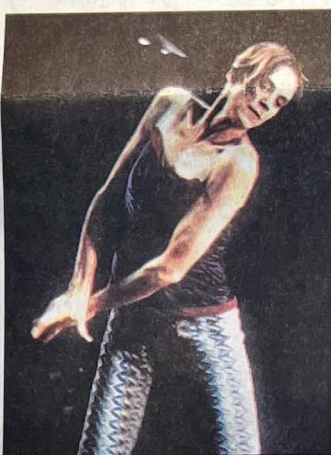
Much of Baker's career has also been devoted to teaching: in the early 1990s, she was the master teacher most requested through the Canada Council's Guest Teachers Program in Modern Dance. This led to an invitation to be the Artist-in-Residence at the National Ballet School in Toronto. In exchange for teaching students contemporary dance technique, she is given a living wage and access to studio space for her own rehearsals.

Baker is 48 now and knows that every performance could be her last. "As I get older, I have had to give up elements of my physicality that I could sustain when I was a little bit younger," she says, hence "this sense of urgency (to perform



CYLLA VON TIEDEMANN

In 'Unfold,' Peggy Baker performs with just a solo musician — pianist Andrew Burashko — to Alexander Scriabin's Opus 11.



that) I feel." Asked if she is dancing free of injury at the moment, she laughs at the naiveté of the question. "I haven't danced injury-free for 20 years," she says flatly. "I was saying recently to a young dancer with the National Ballet of Canada that injuries aren't something that get in the way of dancing, they are a part of dancing, that's just all there is

to it." She admits that she'd "blow (her) knees out" now if she tried to do some of the pieces she used to dance with ease. But as everyone knows from the great contributions mature artists make to other art forms, technical tricks are only part of the deal. And the loss she laments is not that evident. As dance critic Michael

Crabb writes, "What is extraordinary is the degree to which Baker has retained so much physical power and athletic capacity while enriching her performance with a lifetime of human experience and artistic insight." And: "(Baker) remains the genuine article, a radiant dancer of exceptional physical and emotional power who can express more in a sin-

gle gesture than dancers half her age can hope to accomplish in a whole evening's performance."

What is it that makes her such a wonderful dance artist? According to Grant Strate, a senior dance professional who has known her since her early days with Dancemakers in Toronto, it is her conviction — that and, of course, a body to

die for: long limbs and a lean, "Greek, heroic" body.

"She believes so intensely in what she is doing. And she has charisma on stage: that undeniable 'something' as a performer. She also puts herself in a very vulnerable position on stage and that's also the mark of a good artist," says Strate.

That willingness to take risks shows up in the two pieces she presents in Ottawa. The first is a co-commission from the National Arts Centre and Symphony Space in New York. Entitled *Unfold*, it is described as a "duet" between her and pianist Andrew Burashko, himself an acclaimed piano soloist.

Set to Alexander Scriabin's *Opus 11*, *Unfold* takes place on a stage where two grand pianos are as much a part of the performance set as they are musical instruments. While Baker dances, Burashko plays, stopping to move between pianos as the piece progresses. "We suddenly see him inside this larger work — this music," explains Baker. "And he's not afraid that it's going to destroy the piece; in fact, the theatrical continuity is heightened. His physical presence and person become the focus. I wanted somehow to reinvigorate the view both of the pianos and of the pianist."

The second work on the program is *In Thine Eyes*, a duet choreographed by Doug Varone, an old dance-mate from Baker's days with Lar Lubovitch. Created originally in 1996, Varone gave the piece to Baker in 1998 and dances with her for this performance.

"It's one of his greatest pieces, a masterwork," says Baker. When it premiered two years ago, "James (Kudelka) called me to say he wished he'd choreographed it and danced it!" Set to the music of Michael Nyman's *Noises, Sounds and Sweet Airs*, the piece presents highly stylized movements that create a unique movement language for courtship and love. "It's almost as though there's some kind of circuitry that's missing and the figures don't recognize what's happened to them. The contrast between the words of the music and the inability of the figures to connect is very disturbing."

Future plans include the tour of a solo created for Baker by Montreal artist Paul-André Fortier, and a commission from Ottawa choreographer Tedd Robinson. By then she'll be almost 50 — with, one hopes, still no end in sight.

Peggy Baker Dance Projects performs Jan. 23 at 8:30 pm in the NAC Theatre. Tickets are \$24 and \$34, available at the NAC box office or through Ticketmaster at 755-1111.