

Dancer inspired by the smallest gestures

Modern dance doyenne Peggy Baker is back onstage in Alberta

DANCE PREVIEW

INTIMATE GESTURE

Peggy Baker
Thursday, May 30
Rozsa Centre (U of C)

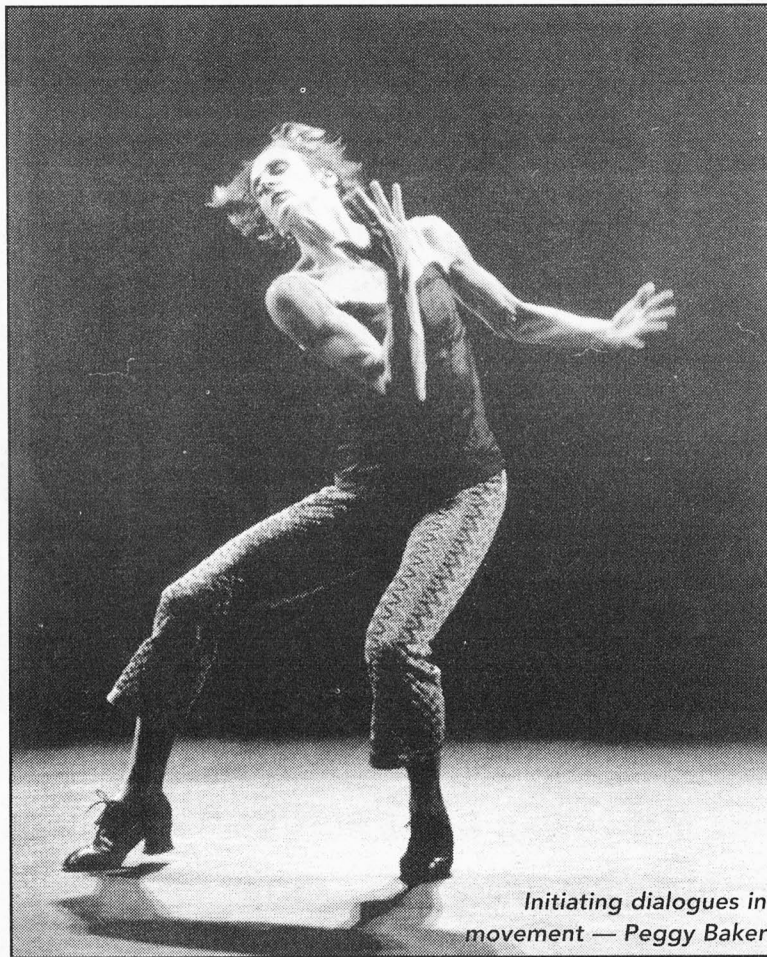
ALLANA LINDGREN

Alberta's doyenne of modern dance is coming home. Edmonton's internationally acclaimed, dancer-choreographer Peggy Baker is teaching at the University of Calgary's program of dance during the spring session.

Her show, *Intimate Gesture*, which premiered in Concord, Massachusetts last summer, is a benefit concert in support of the development of a dance centre in Calgary.

The title, *Intimate Gesture*, was inspired by the journals of poet and novelist May Sarton, whose writing often reflects on the small gestures that define relationships. The evening begins with a *true story*, a piece in which Baker embodies and enacts Sarton's theme — she uses only her hands and text to tell a personal story about being a step-mother. In the works that follow, Baker explores other intrinsic relationships including those between a performer and audience, movement and music.

"Gesture is one of the primary interests for me in dance," Baker says. "I think it's one of the easiest ways in for an audience because we all use gesture constantly in our own daily physical lives. So I creat-



Initiating dialogues in movement — Peggy Baker

ed a program that uses gesture as the take-off point for each one of the dances."

It is not just Baker's gestures that matter, however. With *Intimate Gesture*, she has enlisted pianist David McIntyre to perform with her. She points out that the focus is usually just on the hands of a pianist, but many musicians engage their entire bodies while

playing their instruments. In *furthermore*, the last work on the program, McIntyre must actually stand to perform the John Cage composition incorporated in the piece. In this way, the physical gestures made by McIntyre and Baker become a dialogue in movement.

Baker was a founding member and former artistic director of Dancemakers in Toronto. She per-

formed as a member of New York's Lar Lubovitch Dance Company during the 1980s, before touring with Mikhail Baryshnikov in the inaugural season of the White Oak Dance Project under the direction of Mark Morris. She has also toured Canada and France with Paul-Andre Fortier's *Les parts des anges*.

In 1990, Baker began to work as a solo artist, often collaborating with other artists including composers, actors, dancers, a choreographer and a pianist, among others. In 1993, Baker was appointed the first Artist-in-Residence at the National Ballet School of Canada in Toronto. She received an honorary doctorate from the University of Calgary in 2000.

Despite her enormous international success, Baker has never forgotten her roots. A self-proclaimed "Alberta girl," Baker and McIntyre, who is also from Alberta, are performing *Intimate Gesture* to help raise funds for the development of a dance centre, which will be the home for dance-related research at the University of Calgary.

Since its inception in 1995, the university's dance program has quickly outgrown its existing space as its national reputation for excellence has increased enrollment. Its success stems from the fact that it is the only BA program in the country to offer students a joint degree through the Faculty of Fine Arts and the Faculty of Kinesiology.

The proposed dance centre will provide urgently needed rehearsal and theatre space for Calgary's dance community, which includes presenters such as Alberta Ballet, Dancers' Studio West, Decidedly

Jazz Danceworks, One Yellow Rabbit, Springboard Dance and Youth Dance Unlimited.

Baker has recognized the importance of the program by naming the U of C as the repository for her next project. Thanks to a three-year grant from the George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation in Toronto, Baker will begin to pass on her expertise to other performers beginning this June. She has chosen participants who range in age from 23 to those in their mid-50s, and who have a diverse spectrum of training including classical Indian dance and contact improv.

The eclectic choices for her artistic heirs are deliberate. "I believe in cross-pollination and how that creates strength," she says. "I am curious and excited to see work that was made for one body, one sensibility and one training background expressed by many, many kinds of people. What I am hoping is that people will take this work and do covers like musicians do...."

"Historical reconstruction is the standard in modern dance and I'm not interested in that. I am interested in personal investment and development. I would love to see my work go on and be relevant in some way because of the freedom someone takes in using it as a performance vehicle."

Baker's willingness to give her work to other artists is the kind of gesture that best defines her generous spirit.

"The whole reason I've spent all my adult life training and creating work is so I can share it with people," she says. "It's all about communication."