

# Globe Review



SIMON HAYTER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Baker is about to begin a five-city Canadian tour that features her new solo work, *Krishna's Mouth*.

## The soloist who is peerless

At 53, the incomparable Peggy Baker is embarking on another cross-country tour. She does it to feed her soul, **PAULA CITRON** writes

**W**hen it is mentioned to Peggy Baker at the start of an interview that we are going to look back at her life, she quips: "It's a long way back."

The statement has as much truth as humour. At 53, when most dance artists have long retired from the stage, the astonishing Baker this week is beginning a five-city Canadian tour that features her new solo,

*Krishna's Mouth*, as well as works by Montreal's Paul-André Fortier and New York's Doug Varone.

Baker is Canadian dance royalty. She is the country's most revered modern dancer, and one of the most requested master teachers. She has been artist-in-residence at the National Ballet School in Toronto since 1991 and developed the modern-dance component of the training syllabus.

"Peggy Baker has the capacity to explore and integrate the physical, spiritual and intellectual aspects of dance with an almost unparalleled depth and sensitivity," NBS artistic director Mavis Staines says. "To watch Peggy in action is to have the experience of observing the impossible come to life in front of your eyes."

Staines is not alone in using superlatives: Discussion about the

Baker phenomenon with her colleagues become a veritable love-in.

Susan Macpherson, herself an icon who graced Toronto Dance Theatre and Danny Grossman Dance Company, equates Baker to quicksilver. "Peggy moves with a thrilling intensity and almost electrifying energy," she says, "then in the next moment, she can shift into a glorious, sweeping, musical lyricism that takes your breath away."

Choreographer Sasha Ivanochko, a former TDT dancer, feels that Baker totally embodies the concept of an artist. "The physical Peggy is a dancer who knows her body from core to skin, and has honed her technique past the point of mastery. She has given some of the most honest and profound performances I have ever witnessed."

Former National Ballet superstar Rex Harrington puts it more simply.

"As a solo artist she has very few peers, if any, in Canada."

What is surprising among all this purple prose is the fact that Baker started her serious dance training relatively late, when she was 19.

She was born Peggy Laurayne Smith in Edmonton. Her mother was a tap-dance teacher and her father a sports psychologist.

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# Baker keeps going and . . .

**BAKER** from page R1

Baker was the oldest girl and second child of six. "I've noticed that a lot of dancers are second children," she says. "Maybe we were given more freedom because our parents weren't as self-conscious about being parents."

As a youngster, Baker developed a flair for drama. When she was in Grade 10, she won a scholarship at a high-school theatre festival that entitled her to attend a summer provincial drama seminar in Drumheller, Alta. There, she encountered Patricia Beatty, co-founder of Toronto Dance Theatre, who was teaching movement for actors using the Graham technique. Baker says: "Trish presented the possibility of being a real woman in this world. She wasn't a character in a play. She defied female stereotypes. She was sensual, intellectual, earthy and poetic."

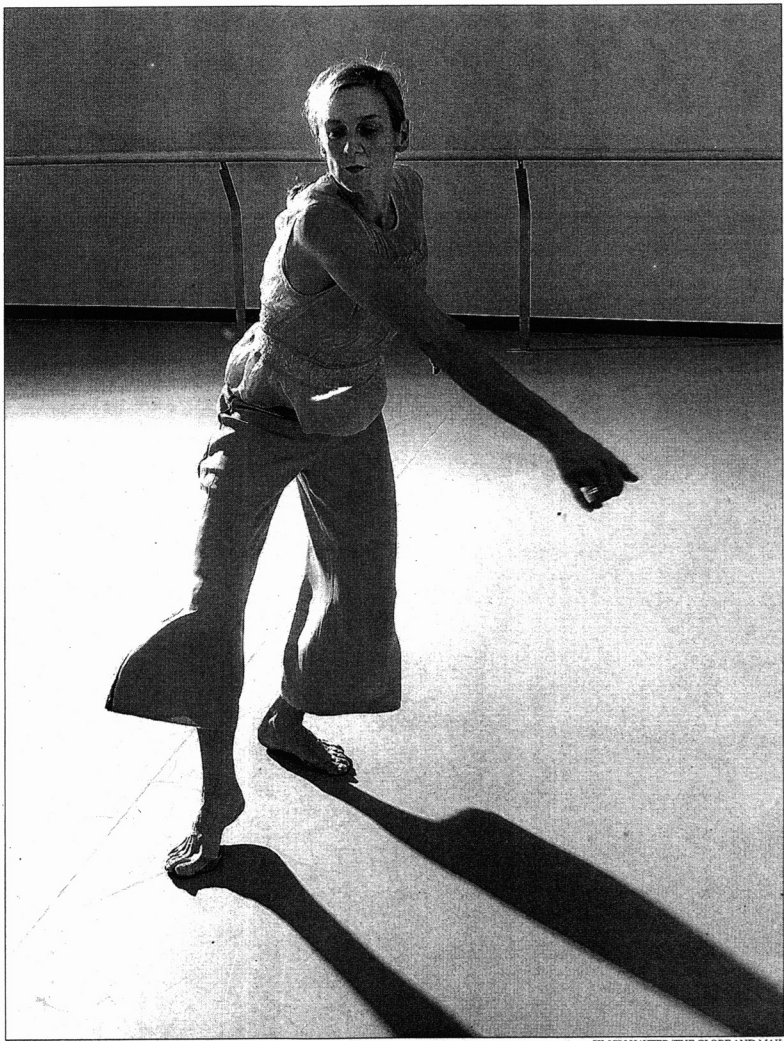
It would take three more years for the Beatty seed to flower. In the meantime, Baker was one of 12 students accepted into the University of Alberta's prestigious drama program, but she lasted only one year. She married boyfriend Michael J. Baker, a trumpet player in the Edmonton Symphony, and the two came to Toronto where she enrolled as a student at TDT. (Michael, who died in 2000, would make his mark as a classical composer.)

After three years of training, Baker became an apprentice with the TDT company, but at the same time, was intrigued with other dance techniques.

She hooked up with graduates from York University, and in 1974, they founded Dancemakers. Baker later became artistic director. "We were a collective of curious individuals," she says. "We'd all go off to take workshops and come back and teach each other."

It was at a Lar Lubovitch intensive in New York that the ground-breaking American choreographer first noticed the talented Baker. It took three phone calls, but he persuaded her to leave Toronto and join his company.

Baker was there for the Lubovitch glory years, 1980-88, but the move precipitated the end of her marriage.



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**Peggy Baker: 'I'm so grateful that I discovered dance, because I met myself and found myself.'**

Working with Lubovitch was a revelation. His non-gender-specific choreography drew on the world, and was an innovative amalgam of many dance styles. His influence can still be seen in Baker's own eclectic choreographic movement. By the late eighties, however, Lubovitch was moving more into dance that required serious ballet training, isolating Baker in solo roles rather than as part of the ensemble. Baker left the company because she felt she was no longer a Lubovitch dancer.

Within a year she was snapped up by Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Project, performing the choreography of Mark Morris, another Lubovitch alumnus. This A-list tour, however, convinced Baker that she

didn't want to be in a company any more. "I had a huge appetite to find myself," she says. "I wanted to be alone in a studio. The work I was doing didn't feed me as an artist."

Thus Baker, the choreographer, was born.

She returned to Canada, and at a teaching intensive in Winnipeg in May, 1990, she reconnected with gifted Toronto-based percussionist/composer Ahmed Hassan. It was an intense courtship. They married in December, and Baker became stepmother to Hassan's daughter Sherifa. At that time, Hassan was already diagnosed with a particularly virulent form of multiple sclerosis.

He is now in a long-term care facility, but their relationship remains strong. "I came to dance late, and I met Ahmed late," she says, "but it was all meant to be."

When her colleagues are asked to deconstruct Baker as both a dancer and choreographer, some interesting points are raised.

"She doesn't have an ideal body," Fortier says. "She's all out of proportion — a small head, a short torso, big hands and feet — yet she is the incarnation of dance because it is in her heart, flesh, bones and soul. You cannot be indifferent to her when she is on stage."

Pianist Andrew Burashko has been a long-time collaborator, and feels that one of Baker's choreographic strengths is her use of live music. "She enjoys the spontaneity because it's unpredictable. She also finds the physicality of musicians very powerful and honest, and she feeds off us. It's all about serving the music."

Fortier finds her very conserva-

tive in both her themes and movement vocabulary. "What makes her a choreographic success is her integrity and passion. When she wants to be daring or uncomfortable, she performs the works of others."

Baker is the first to admit that her choreography is introspective, cerebral and abstract, but her admirers point to her deep subtext that radiates love, life and pain.

A case in point is her new work, *Krishna's Mouth*. Her inspiration is the story about Lord Krishna as a baby. As infants are prone to do, he ate some earth, and his mother saw the entire universe in his mouth.

"It's a great story, an essential one," Baker says, "because it's about discovery, awe and mystery."

She is dedicating *Krishna's Mouth* to Hassan. "He has had a huge impact on me, and the piece is a lot about him — how helpless creatures are full of wisdom, how much you can do with so little, and how inspiring, if unusual, is this journey that we are taking together."

When Baker is asked to sum up her life in dance, she says: "My choreography has been preoccupied with presenting a broader portrayal of being a woman in the world. I'm so grateful that I discovered dance, because I met myself and found myself."

*Peggy Baker performs in Calgary tomorrow and Friday; Quebec City, Jan. 26-28; Montreal, Feb. 2; Toronto, Feb. 9-12, and Winnipeg, Feb. 16-18. Andrew Burashko's Art of Time Ensemble presents works by Baker, performed by Sasha Ivanochko and Tanya Howard, in Toronto, Feb. 3-4.*