

# Adding result to injury

PEGGY BAKER

Fracture lets  
dance icon take  
time to rethink  
new show

BY MICHAEL CRABB

Canadian modern dance icon Peggy Baker has had several alarming brushes with potentially career-ending injuries but, despite the odds, she's always bounced back. Her latest rebound occurs tonight at the University of Calgary, where Baker — who holds an honorary doctorate from the same institution — launches an ambitious winter touring season featuring her newest work, *Portal*.

If things had gone as planned, *Portal* would have received its premiere in Montreal a year ago with further performances in Toronto, but two weeks before the opening Baker broke her foot. It was a devastating blow for a dancer whose performing career had already hung in the balance when she underwent knee surgery in 2001. Says Baker, recalling the emotional impact: "It was like hitting a brick wall."

The foot was immobilized for three months. It took Baker another three to get her body back in shape, which is not so easy for a middle-aged dancer. Yet, as she reflects on the disappointment of that cancelled 2007 tour, Baker concedes it yielded some benefits. *Portal* sat undisturbed in her imagination and muscle memory. Returning to it allowed her to reconsider. "I actually changed it quite a lot."

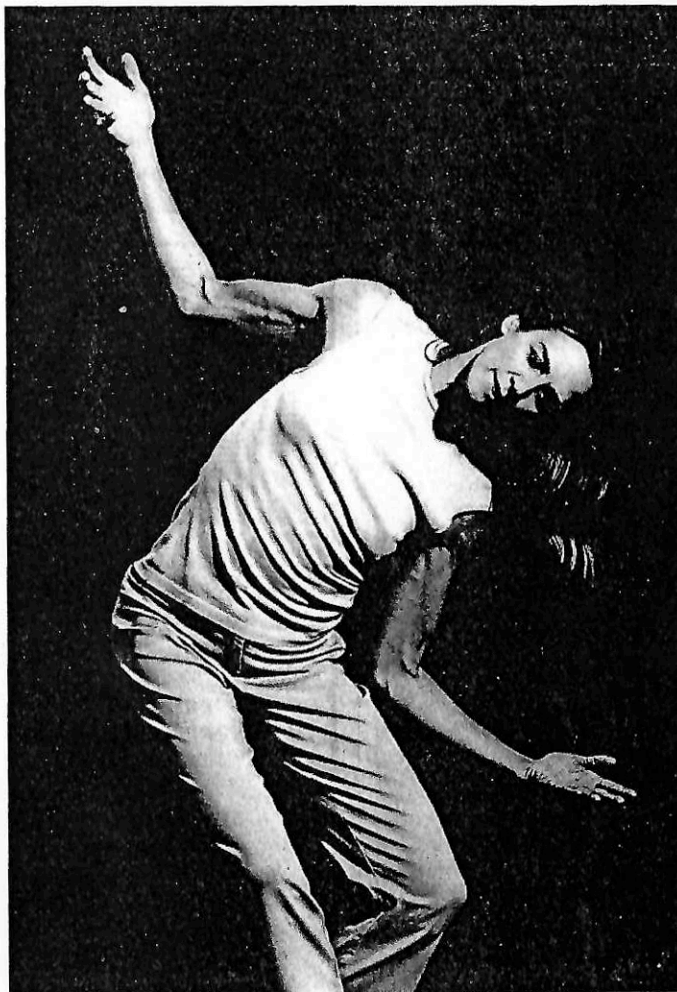
*Portal*, a 10-minute solo, is the only work Baker is per-

forming in all three tour stops — Calgary, Montreal and Toronto. Like some of Baker's earlier works, *Portal* is performed in silence. "Stripping the movement down that bare is very exciting," says the Toronto-based artist. "It can be a very intimate experience for those watching, drawing them into my movement world."

Baker's new self-choreographed solo is not, however, unaccompanied. Marc Parent's lighting plot, which selectively reveals and distorts Baker's moving body, is integral to the choreography. "I see it as a duet for light and me," says Baker.

Such intense collaborations with other artists have been a hallmark of the Edmonton-born Baker's career since she returned to Canada in 1990 after a decade dancing in the United States. Her most frequent collaborator is Canadian pianist Andrew Burashko, artistic director of Toronto's adventurous Art of Time Ensemble, with whom Baker will also appear as a guest artist in late March. Burashko's very visible presence on stage in Baker's own shows elevates him far beyond the role of musical accompanist. Baker and Burashko become equal partners in an intimate dialogue of music and movement.

Burashko will be at the keyboard in Calgary tonight, playing Philip Glass's *Dreaming Awake* for the premiere of New York choreographer Molissa Fenley's same-titled commissioned solo for Baker. In Montreal, Burashko, along with cellist Shauna Rolston and violinist Benjamin Bowman, will be performing Shostakovich's *Piano Trio No. 2* for the premiere of former National Ballet artistic director James Kudelka's *A Woman By a Man*, a work also programmed for



JOHN LAUENE

With *Portal*, her new work, 55-year-old dancer Peggy Baker says she is trying "respect where I am in my physical life."

Baker's Toronto appearance. It's a duet specially fashioned for two mature dancers, Baker and Michael Sean Marye. "It's a very unusual treatment of the music," says Baker. "It's a portrait of a relationship, a couple who've known each other a very long time."

At age 55, Baker is still an extraordinarily compelling dancer. The sheer force of her intense concentration compels attention. She sculpts space with carefully calibrated movement, embellished with economical gestures that draw audiences into a magical realm where meaning and emotion are conveyed by visual metaphor.

As fine as she remains, Baker is ever a realist. "I'm trying to act my age and respect where I am in my physical life." So while she will appear in all three works on the Calgary program — the third is her 2006 solo *Krishna's Mouth* — she's assigning some of the solo dancing to others in Montreal and Toronto, part of a process of passing

on the choreographic legacy that Baker began six years ago. Andrea Nann will dance *Unfold* in its Montreal premiere. Jessica Runge will perform Baker's *Brahms Waltzes* in Toronto.

The inevitable question is how long the much-honoured Baker herself will continue performing. She's set no schedule, but emphatically does not want to become the dancing shadow of her former self. Meanwhile, she remains profoundly grateful for what she has. "I'm so lucky to be involved in an art form where there are things that benefit from maturity and in finding work that suits my interests and physicality at this age."

■ Peggy Baker performs tonight at 8 p.m. at the University Theatre, 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary. Tickets from \$10; call 403-220-7202 or visit [www.finearts.ucalgary.ca/events](http://www.finearts.ucalgary.ca/events) for information. Baker's tour continues to Montreal on Feb. 20-23 and Toronto, Mar. 6-9.