

# Laughing through the darkness

Peggy Baker lets her light touch shine even in her serious moments

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DANCE WRITER

For a serious artist with a serious career, Peggy Baker likes a laugh. She appreciates getting laughs too.

Her natural buoyancy is revealed in different ways in the work she performs, often collaborating with a select group of familiars: choreographers Doug Varone, Melissa Penley, Paul-André Fortier and James Kudelka, and musicians such as Andrew Burashko and Shauna Rolston.

Even if the mood is dark, there's always something forward-looking, an unstoppable energy in a Peggy Baker dance.

The fruits of her long relationships with other artists are a major aspect of Baker's achievement as a choreographer and an interpreter. A long artistic partnership with James Kudelka — their friendship began when she was in her mid-20s and he a little younger — has lately resulted in a duet, *A Woman by a Man*, which Baker will dance with Michael Sean Marye, for four performances starting tonight at the Betty Oliphant Theatre, as part of a program called *Portal*.

As Kudelka recalls, Baker's request for a lengthy duet prompted

him to pull off the shelf a recording of Dmitri Shostakovich's *Piano Trio No. 2* sent to him by Burashko, "knowing that Andrew would be part of the concert with Peggy and (that) it was a piece he wanted to play. I had the music but had not considered it as a dance piece until this particular alignment of forces presented itself."

The musicians, Burashko on piano, Benjamin Bowman on violin and Rolston on cello, are such an integral part of the performance that Baker refers to it as a quintet. The music at times seems like the sound of a rapidly building dance.

Don't read too much romance into *A Woman by a Man*. "It suggests a relationship for sure," says Baker, in the light and airy faculty office she occupies as a teacher at the National Ballet School. "In my interpretation — James does not speak explicitly about the content of his work with the dancers — it's about a couple who have been in a relationship for a very long time. They are literally, physically, metaphorically attached to each other."

In rehearsal, she clings to Marye, like a vine to a sturdy tree, uncommonly slight and short next to his strong build and height. "The love-story part is long gone for this couple and the habit of functioning together is what's going on there," she says.

Kudelka has made a highly stylized dance, emphasizing for the audience that what they are watching is a performance, a construct, by giving breaks for the musicians to adjust their

instruments and for the dancers to change their footwear.

"I think it's hilarious," Baker says, recalling bursts of laughter during rehearsals, even at a slapstick bit where her partner drops her face-first on the floor. But Baker is not sure whether the Montreal audience that saw it first was disarmed or simply looking for something that wasn't there. She didn't hear a lot of guffaws.

"I think sometimes people are looking for more than what they just see. If you trust what you're looking at, you basically know everything there is to know about a dance. It's about looking at bodies in motion. I think there's a lot of effort spent trying to get behind it or something. But if it was better expressed in another way, it would be a book or a piece of music, or a poem or something."

Baker is a consummate character actor and whether it's Ophelia or Juliet (in another Kudelka piece) or one of the dark and disturbing Volpe Sisters (in a duet by Varone), she can project a personality on stage as well as any talking actor. Each of the four pieces that Kudelka has created for her is distinct, but they all involve a character.

"He's very articulate and he's very clear about what he wants you to do in the rehearsals. But I feel comfortable enough with him or myself to extrapolate from what he's saying. I try to fill in blanks when I'm

working with people, and we have a wonderful rapport in that regard." Also, says Baker, he is very funny in rehearsals. "He doesn't allow you to take yourself so seriously that you can't take a lot of pleasure in the difficulty that you're facing in the work."

Kudelka, who now lives in the country outside Toronto and is reportedly advancing in a parallel career as a baker, revealed some of his self-deprecating wit in an email message: "I work quickly, and I think that was challenging. I never really saw a run-through of the dance until it was taught to Michael Sean this year.

"It was a challenging score because it is long for a duet. I tried to treat the dancers and musicians as equals so that the dance and the music take turns as the focus of the whole.

"As usual, I suppose, the dead white man wins, but it was fun trying to keep up."

Also on the program: Baker has structured a show that presents two older works, *Brahms Waltzes* and *Yang*, plus a new solo, *Portal*, that is danced entirely in silence.

"Usually after I've had a few experiences directed by other people, I like to look back and see where I'm at now," says Baker. At 55 she sees much to go on dancing for, especially in the deepening relationships she has built with other artists.

"There are all kinds of things that I would love to do, but dancing just has me by the throat," she laughs. "I can't extricate myself from it yet."

## Just the facts

**WHAT:** *Portal*

**WHEN:** Tonight, Fri. and Sat. at 8:30 and Sunday at 4 p.m.

**WHERE:** Betty Oliphant Theatre, 404 Jarvis St.

**TICKETS:** \$26, PWYC on Friday, at 416-504-7529 or artsboxoffice.ca

