



Peggy Baker: At 56, dancer fends off retirement

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It should not come as a surprise to those who adore watching Peggy Baker perform that what strikes one first on meeting her is a captivating smile and a buoyant sense of humour.

"I was signing books in Ottawa," she says, alluding to Carol Anderson's *Unfold: A Portrait of Peggy Baker*.

"And my good friend Christopher House came up to the table with a book. I said, 'Christopher, the end is near - when you're signing books about your life.'"

She gives a hearty laugh, recognizing that at 56 she is hardly a senior, but in dance terms is definitely a mature artist.

A ballet dancer should start thinking about what else she can do from her mid-30s. For modern and contemporary dancers the career, if well managed, can last longer, into the 40s. You have to be very savvy to be still going strong, creatively and physically, in your 50s.

For Baker, the choice to become a solo dancer has been the secret to extending her life onstage. "I would not be dancing for as long as I have if I were in a company. No company could put up with the way I have to take care of myself now. But because I'm totally in charge of myself, I can decide how hard I'm going to push myself on a given day."



RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

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That given day would certainly include going to the gym, possibly teaching a class or working with students at the National Ballet School, rehearsing an existing work or preparing a new one. In the past, she would attend dance class at least once a day, but that is no longer an everyday obligation.

As dancers get older, they must take total responsibility for their physical condition. Baker has had three surgeries on her knees. Among her peers, though, are those who've had knee and hip replacements, common operations among dancers.

For the individual artist, ignored and economically sidelined, facing old age can be fearful. In the Netherlands, dancers are eligible for working pensions. Here they get only the same old age pension as everyone else. Health coverage is fine for surgery or hospitalization, but the all-important physiotherapy has to be covered out of pocket. And, says Baker, "it's expensive."

More advocate than complainer, though, she looks back from her perspective as a mature dancer and sees only what's easier now: "You're deeper inside the form and everything is closer to the bone. You drop superfluous problems and complications. It's a kind of distilling."

The bitter facts of life for a dancer make one wonder why anyone would choose dance as a way to make a living.

"It wasn't a question of doing it for a living," Baker counters. From her first contact with dance, "I wanted to do that with my life. The living part didn't cross my mind.

"I think you have to be a bit naive," she says of embarking on life as a professional dancer. "Luckily we all are in our teens and 20s. We don't know enough, or I think very few people would enter quite a few professions, not just dance."

Already married to composer Michael J. Baker when she moved to Toronto from her native Edmonton, Baker took very seriously her apprenticeship as a dancer at Toronto Dance Theatre from 1974 to 1975. Her routine was to take a class in the morning and two in the evening.

"I feel very, very lucky," she says. "I know that a great deal of success is based on the amount of ease I had in pursuing my training. I got a Canada Council study grant to go to New York for an entire year."

It wasn't enough to live on, so Baker made desserts in a restaurant to bridge the gap between grant and cost of living. That grant and subsequent stipends she earned in the 1970s "made so many things possible for me," she says.

As well as attending workshops and taking classes at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance, she took in every show she could see. "I saw dance, I'm willing to bet, five times a week when I was living in New York."

In 1974 Baker became a charter member of Dancemakers. Here she made her first works as a choreographer.

New York became her permanent home after she joined the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company in 1981. She danced with the company until 1988 and performed with and for others as well. Her first solo concert in Canada, *Le Charme de l'Impossible*, was a commission from the Canada Dance Festival that premiered in 1990 at the Winnipeg Dance Festival.

She was 36 when she left the Lubovitch company. She felt she was looking toward winding down, and even considered taking up Pilates instruction. But one solo work led to another and before she knew it, she was a company of one, incorporated in 1996 as Peggy Baker Dance Projects.

Teaching is not an unusual choice for a dancer to make, and in Baker's case has provided her with stability and opportunity - at a cost. At the National Ballet School, her chief employer, she teaches three levels of students contemporary dance three times a week; that amounts to more than 13 hours of class time alone.

"I find it really hard teaching when I'm choreographing because I have to use a tremendous amount of energy and time developing material for my classes," she says. And she takes her responsibilities for the students' training very seriously. "It's really hard to drop all that and start working on a dance."

On the plus side, Baker has always had access to the NBS studios, each of which has a piano. That was an opportunity to work with classical pianist Andrew Burashko, in a relationship that goes back more than 17 years. A series of "duets" with him have been among the most important of her works.

Teaching is a creative drain, but it is also a way to clarify what you're doing in your creative life. Baker doesn't knock it. She is eloquent on the subject of how dance survives by literally passing on the training and the choreography hand-to-hand: "The wisdom is very hard won, and it's lost in an instant when someone leaves the art form. It is the connective tissue."

That is why, when the chance presented itself, Baker formed The Choreographer's Trust, a two-phase project that allowed her to preserve, document and pass on works including *In a Landscape*, *Brahms Waltzes*, *Unfold*, *Yang*, *Sanctum* and *Brute*.

Passionate about her country, Baker offers many fine examples of the arts' importance to our national identity. "People connect with something they kind of fall in love with. It lifts them up and gives them a whole other language to animate their thinking."