

## Peggy Baker's life. In dance

*Edmonton-born star tells her own story in words and choreography*

Salena Kitteringham



**EDMONTON** / Peggy Baker's laugh booms joyously when told she's probably the most accomplished drama-school dropout the University of Alberta has ever known.

Baker is without a doubt one of the most influential and outstanding contemporary dancers of our time. It should be a point of fierce pride for all of us to call her Edmonton's own.

Sure, Peggy Baker, nee Smith, was only 19 when she left her home under the big sky to head to the big city, abandoning her theatre studies at U of A to pursue modern dance training at the Toronto Dance Theatre.

But she didn't go off to become a dancer; she was born a dancer, right here in 1952.

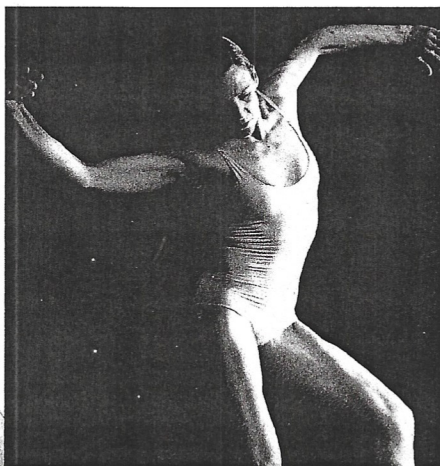
"I've been dancing since I curled and twisted and thrust my limbs, floating in my mother's womb," as she put it eloquently in her speech last May accepting a Governor General's Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement.

"As a child I danced in the living room, down city sidewalks, in classes that met once a week, in community recitals and amateur musicals. I discovered modern dance at theatre school and, thunderstruck, I put aside everything else to pursue it."

Certainly, her adult life has been danced out elsewhere, with Dancemakers, the Toronto company she co-founded in 1974, touring with Lar Lubovitch's New York City company across the continent and around the world in the 1980s, and with the likes of Mikhail Baryshnikov and Mark Morris as part of their inaugural White Oak Dance Project season in 1990. That was before her illustrious solo career out of her own Peggy Baker Dance Projects these past two decades, taking up artistic residence at Canada's National Ballet in 1992 and heading up the modern dance program to this day.

But in our city, she should remain our Peggy Baker. And this suits her fine.

"I was shaped by childhood and my adolescence, by my school years, by my family and by the landscape that I grew up in," Baker says emphati-



CYLLA VON TIEDEMANN  
Peggy Baker's new, autobiographical show is a fluid monologue in dance and spoken word.

### DANCE PREVIEW

#### The Disappearance of Right and Left

**Dancer:** Peggy Baker

**Where:** Arden Theatre, 5 St. Anne St., St. Albert

**When:** Today at 11 a.m.

with brunch, or at 8 p.m.

with hors d'oeuvres

**Tickets:** \$50 through the Arden

Theatre box office, 780-459-

1542, and Ticketmaster,

780-451-8000

cally. "The piece I'm performing in St. Albert has absolutely everything to do with that. It is quite a testament to what impact our family has — not just the immediate family we grew up with, but actually our ancestors. Their influence is maybe very subtle, but it goes very, very deeply."



# To prepare, Baker wrote about two memories for each year of her life

## DANCE

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The autobiographical piece is called *The Disappearance of Right and Left*, and was commissioned by Baker in 2004 from Sarah Chase, a Canadian choreographer of a younger generation. She is what you might call a veritable dancemaking anthropologist in the way she digs and pulls out memories for her material and brilliantly weaves dancers' own words with her looping, abstract movement gestures.

"She's a dance poet," Baker says of Chase. "She's looking for meaning that resonates, ideas that are powerful metaphors and therefore can have a lot of different kinds of meanings. She wants to work with rich subject matter."

Baker was 51 when she embarked on the work's creation. Chase's preliminary assignment was for Baker to write two stories for every year of her life.

"Initially, I said 'Sarah, I will never be able to remember even one memory for every year of my life!'

"But she said if you just get started, other memories will start welling up and you might not remember exactly when they happened but they will start to take shape for you, and you'll begin to organize them," Baker recalls.

Baker did do the hard work to unearth her childhood, starting by writing about the most easily accessible moments in her mind's eye — the many instances of creative play with her brothers and sisters, such as the great performances they would stage together on Christmas Day for her parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles.

In total, Baker wrote 102 stories. She dedicated at least two hours a day for an entire summer to resurrect the memories to form the framework for the dance piece.

As part of the process, Baker shared many conversations with her parents, learning private stories about her family and herself. "I realized that the outcome of these stories was still shaping us five generations later."

The finished piece folds dance together with text in a truly magical way.

Baker engages in authentic, straightforward storytelling, a fluid dancing monologue not delivered in memorized lines but in her own voice, with the words a little different each night.

The presentation is refreshingly original in its structure and void of any fourth wall. The house lights stay up throughout the entire performance so Baker can intimately lock eyes with her audience, also allowing viewers to comfortably refer to the dance's version of a printed program. It's an unusual

handout of printed photographs and images — a kind of loose sheet torn from a treasured scrapbook, mapping out the tales being spun before them.

The words reflect off the stirring music, appropriately hand-picked from the Prairie girl's personal playlist — Joni Mitchell's *Amelia* and several Beethoven pieces recorded by Baker's longtime musical collaborator, pianist Andrew Burashko.

"I believe the people who see this work feel they understand the choreography and this is usually the main hurdle to people looking at contemporary dance. They feel there should be one particular meaning to movement, and they don't feel that they have the kind of index to decode what that is," Baker explains.

"I think the truth of contemporary dance is that the images are completed by the viewer; their own memories and emotional life and context are the completion and the last element that needs to be added in any contemporary art.

"It has to be received by someone who feels they have found some resonance, whether it's just interest or beauty or a sense of drawing them forward because of their curiosity, or whether they feel a connection to how they actually see the world or experience their life."

*The Disappearance of Right and Left* has extraordinary challenges for Baker as a performer, as well as many great pleasures.

"When I was first performing this, I had never done anything before that was so frightening. With long stretches within the performances, when the dancer simply stands still to talk, sometimes for as long as six or seven minutes, it truly proved new and challenging for the mover. It was a big leap — storytelling puts you more on the line.

"I feel in my earliest performances, I wasn't able to sustain some aspects through the duration. I have that more under control now.

Her life has changed a lot since first performing *The Disappearance of Right and Left*.

"I'll tell you, last spring I was performing it in a theatre in Toronto and my nephew was there. He was a 12-year-old boy watching my performance, and the story that I tell about him inside the show is his birth. And there he was, sitting there in front of me. When I spoke of my father as a 12-year-old boy, and I could see right there in front of me my sister's 12-year-old boy, I suddenly could picture my own father more clearly.

"I think in the past, whenever I'd spoken of my father being 12 years old, it was an idea. I'd seen photographs of him, but I'd never really pictured him as a flesh-and-blood person at that age, as a boy with all sorts of frailties and uncertainties of what his life would be.

"But when I spoke of my father as a 12-year-old boy with my little nephew right there, it was completely different. It was extremely emotional."

“She’s a dance poet.”

Peggy Baker on Sarah Chase,  
choreographer of her  
current show