

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Dance

Peggy Baker and Michael Healey's delicate dance of aging

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Artistic collaborators Peggy Baker and Michael Healey first met on a blind date. Well, actually it was a fundraising evening at Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille in 2003 that brought the contemporary dancer/choreographer and the actor-turned-playwright together on-stage.

The title, however, was *Blind Date*, the concept improvised artistic pairings, and Healey figures the other artists involved cheated, got together beforehand and planned stuff. Not Healey. Not Baker. They were going to wing it.

"We literally met for the first time on stage," Healey recalls.

"When our turn came, we stood up and went...," Baker continues.

"Oh, that's you...," Healey interjects.

"... and shook hands." Baker said.

Baker improvised movement in four areas of the stage while Healey simultaneously told three stories about himself.

"There was something fun about the accidentalness of it," Healey recalls. "Just due to proximity or a mutual pause, something accidentally would look like something planned, or resonant."

"It was strange and scary. I was dancing super, super close to you and we didn't know each other," Baker tells Healey. "You didn't know what I was doing and I didn't know where your stories were going. It was exciting."

"You could feel it in the room that something worked," he replies.

From that night, a partnership was born, a partnership that brought together a leading playwright (*The Drawer Boy*) and amiable stage presence with an award-winning dancer known for performing her own expressive choreography. If they share an aesthetic, it is a

kind of angular honesty: On Friday in Toronto, the two will unveil their first fully planned collaboration at the Factory Theatre where Peggy Baker Dance Projects is producing *Are You Okay?*, a dance by Baker and monologue by Healey on the subject of creation in midlife.

It's the first time, Healey, 47, has written for Baker, 58, interviewing her about the realities of aging for a dancer to help shape his monologue about doing and being. But it's actually the third time he has performed with her: after their blind date, he appeared with Baker in *Radio Play*, another dance-theatre piece she created in 2008, featuring a confrontation between an impoverished modern dancer and a guy with a real job. Healey was filling in for a dancer who had created the role for its first outing but was unable to reprise it because of an injury.

"I thought, rather than look for another dancer who is pushing himself into the acting realm, I'll look for an actor and that way I can learn a bit more," Baker says. Healey, however, turned out to be a very slow learner on the cross-disciplinary front. He watched a video of the original performance and worked two hours a day, five days a week for more than four months to learn the moves.

"I am not a dancer," Healey says.

"You became a beautiful dancer," Baker corrects him.

"But this is a whole new thing," she continues. "Michael has written a play. Michael is the playwright and actor; I am the choreographer and dancer: I do not speak."

Instead, Healey will speak – about getting through the labyrinth of life, about getting things done, about running out of time, and about cartilage, a substance he describes as somewhere between gummy bears and car tires in its consistency. Like Healey, cartilage is a slow learner: It takes all your life to learn how to move, and just when you achieve grace, your cartilage begins to decay. There's a hard metaphor there for a dancer over 50.

"I'm in middle age in my personal life, but I am elderly as a dancer," Baker said, pointing out she no longer performs full solo evenings and that any appearance she makes is always accompanied by the observation that she is still dancing. She knows she will have to retire at some point but doesn't want anyone planning the gala yet. "I am still extremely engaged and I see examples of people like [62-year-old choreographer] Pierre-André Fortier who inspire me to keep going with the creative act."

Healey, on the other hand, is a decade younger and an actor who took up playwriting early in his career. "I don't feel a clock ticking," he says. On the contrary, he feels he has achieved the right – or perhaps it's a luxury – to clearer focus in middle age. "I am spending my time on the things I want to spend my time on."

The result, the pair say, is a dialogue about the artist's control – of material, of the body, of life.

"I think for some people there will be poignancy," says Baker. "But for some, they won't have had any physical issue yet with their body...."

"It might be comic," Healey offers, finishing her thought.

Are You Okay? runs from March 4 to 13 at Toronto's Factory Theatre.

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