

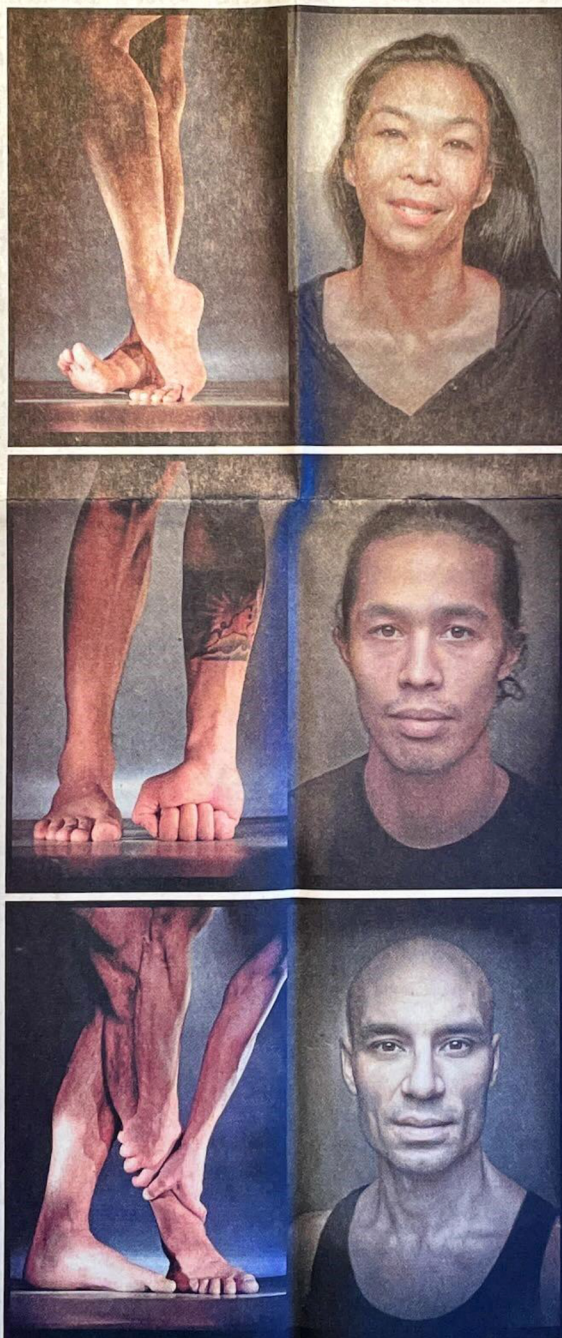
Globe Arts

ACTING ARTS EDITOR: JULIE TRAVES

DANCE

PEGGY BAKER'S BOLD NEW STEPS

For 20 years, she was a solo performer. Now, she's building her own company, and finding inspiration in the 'choreographic' poetry of John Cage



These dancers are the central focus, Baker says. The company includes Andrea Nann, top; Benjamin Kamino and Sean Ling. A new series of photographs will show along with the performances in Toronto. JOËL BÉNARD

GUY DIXON

In a new piece by acclaimed solo dancer Peggy Baker, the works of composer John Cage are being reinterpreted through choreography, playing with sounds and words as much as with movement. Yet at the same time, Baker is performing a new experiment on her own career.

A new series of photographs by Joël Bénard highlights the fact that the multiple award-winning dancer is moving into a new phase, as choreographer at the centre of her own dance company.

"The significance is that for the last 20 years I've been a solo performer. And I'm now developing a company. These are the faces of the people I'm working with," Baker says. "To me, it's really important now to start to reintroduce myself, no longer as the central focus of my own work. These dancers are the central focus."

And she's using the work of composer John Cage to emphasize this. In her new piece *Piano/Quartet*, debuting at Toronto's Betty Oliphant Theatre on Friday, Baker isn't dancing for that portion of the program at all, but is the choreographer for the piece based on the poetry of Cage.

Baker, who has been a professional dancer for 38 years, found inspiration in a selection of Cage's poems, which in turn were based on quotations from painter Jasper Johns. For Baker, Cage's poems had the feel of dance. "He was intimately connected to choreography pretty much for the whole arch of his artistic life."

With the composer receiving renewed attention this year on the centenary of his birth, Baker says she was interested in interpreting multiple aspects of Cage's work.

"The poems are incredible to read, and they strike me as having essentially a choreographic structure," Baker says. It wasn't one poem that drew her, but a body of Cage's poetry. *Piano/Quartet*, however, is accompanied by a selection of music from Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes*.

"I thought it would be fascinating to work with two different expressions of Cage, to work with the language and music," Baker says. The program also includes Baker's *In The Fire of Conflict*, danced by Benjamin Kamino to the percussion accompaniment of Beverley Johnston and spoken words by writer-rapper Steve Henry. Baker will also perform solo and silently her work *Portal*.

"Our ears are attuned by the live music and then by the silence, so very much in keeping with Cage's ideas," she says. Cage is perhaps best known for his work 4' 33" of silence.

Baker also wants to highlight at this point in her career the long collaborations she has had with costume and lighting designers over two decades.

"They are very, very close collaborators. I want to bring them more to the awareness of the people. To say, these are the people who helped to shape my aesthetic. And now these are the dancers who are carrying my choreographic ideas forward as I finish my own dance life."

Peggy Baker Dance Projects performs *The Sound and Feel of It*, a program that includes *Piano/Quartet*, at Toronto's Betty Oliphant Theatre from Jan. 20 to 29 (peggybakerdance.com).