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STAGE

Peggy Baker will cap a storied dance career by making room for other dancers' stories

'Toronto is one of the world's most culturally diverse cities, but we haven't had the equity,' Baker tells Michael Crabb. She will wind up Peggy Baker Dance Projects by June 2023 to free up funding for a new generation of underserved and marginalized artists.

By [Michael Crabb](#) Special to the Star

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READ THE CONVERSATION

Peggy Baker, an iconic figure in Canadian dance, has announced that she's closing her company. Peggy Baker Dance Projects will give its final public performances in the fall of next year and will wind up operations by June 2023.

In an exclusive interview, Baker, 68, tells the Star that she believes the moment has come for her to free up the core public funding that supports her artistic endeavours so it can benefit a new generation of dance artists, especially those who have historically been underserved and marginalized. Peggy Baker Dance Projects currently receives more than \$200,000 in annual funding from all levels of government. In the cash-strapped contemporary dance community that's a sizable sum.

"Toronto is one of the world's most culturally diverse cities, but we haven't had the equity," says Baker. "It's really around the issue of social justice that I've made my decision."

Baker says the pandemic has unscored deep societal injustices that must be resolved. "This is a time of reckoning. There's a chance now for big changes to happen because they must happen."

More broadly, Baker also views closing her company as part of a necessary generational shift. "My generation has taken up a lot of space and resources for a long time."



Baker was born and raised in Edmonton. She moved to Toronto in 1971 to study with Toronto Dance Theatre. Baker's contemporary in a TDT summer intensive that year was Patricia Fraser, who's retiring soon after 28 years as artistic director of the School of Toronto Dance Theatre.

Says Fraser: "I remember this incredible-looking creature in my class, this beautiful amazing dancer."

In 1974, Baker and Fraser went on to work together as members of a newly former collective called Dancemakers. "As a dancer, Peggy was mesmerizing and charismatic and brilliant to work with," Fraser says.

By 1981, Baker had moved to New York where she won critical acclaim as a member of the renowned Lar Lubovitch Dance Company. In 1990, Baker became an inaugural member of the White Oak Dance Project, led by famed choreographer Mark Morris and legendary former ballet star Mikhail Baryshnikov. After touring across the United States, Baker then chose to return to Toronto to launch a new career as a solo dancer.

Baker married the Toronto composer and musician Ahmed Hassan, with whom she collaborated intensively until multiple sclerosis robbed him of the ability to work. Hassan's death in 2011 was a deep blow. "It was the hardest thing for me to recover from," says Baker. Ultimately it triggered another turning point in an already long career.

"Peggy has always had this ability to reinvent herself," says Stephanie Hutchison, principal character artist with the National Ballet of Canada and now in her second term as a member of Peggy Baker Dance Project's board of directors. "Peggy is such a super-genuine person and her values run very deep."

As Baker's appetite for performing, along with her physical powers, began to wane, she found a new lease on artistic life by sharing her extensive solo repertoire with younger dancers and by making ensemble dances for her own company.

"There have been these different spans in my dance life," explains Baker. "When I was a company dancer I had no ambition to be a choreographer and I never expected to have a company of dancers, but I was rejuvenated by working with other people. It felt wonderful."

Her company's swan song will be "Beautiful Renegades," commissioned from Toronto playwright Michael Ross Albert. It's inspired by Toronto's 15 Dance Lab, a hub for experimental dance founded in 1972 by former ballet dancing renegades Lawrence and Miriam Adams.

"It's about the ideas that circulated around 15 Dance Lab," says Baker. "About high art and low art, about who gets to say what art is and who gets to make it."

In the same spirit of challenging the status quo, as part of the production Baker has commissioned three new-generation choreographers to make short site-specific works that patrons will encounter as they arrive at the Theatre Centre.

Baker's board of directors is launching a \$300,000 "Celebrating Peggy Baker" fundraising campaign to support the completion of current artistic projects along with two legacy initiatives, an endowed annual cash prize for performance to be awarded to a student in the final year of training at the School of TDT and the Creation Catalogue, a rich online archive of more than 30 years of Baker's creative activity.

"I've always known there would be a lifespan to this company," says Baker, noting that there are plenty of examples of artists whose companies have effectively been forced to close because of funding cuts. "They didn't have any agency in how that happened. I want to be in charge of how my work finishes up. I feel I can bring it to a very beautiful conclusion."



Michael Crabb is a freelance writer who reviews dance and opera performances for the Star

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