

Dancer Peggy Baker finds beauty in bug life

by [Janet Smith](#) on Jan 7, 2014 at 5:17 pm



It may at first seem curious that dance icon Peggy Baker, seeking new inspiration for her work, should find the answer in bugs. But the celebrated 61-year-old performer and choreographer has always been able to reveal the beauty and mystery in movement of all forms. Best known as a solo performer, Baker was searching for new ways to create work for others when her friend Montreal artist Sylvia Safdie (sister of architect Moshe) showed her a new series of insect videos. In one of them, ants rushed in wild patterns around scraps of food on a counter. In another, a beetle was in its death throes. “It was doing the most amazing dance of death,” Baker says, speaking to the *Straight* from her office at Canada’s National Ballet School, where she’s a teacher and long-time artist in residence. “His feelers were reaching out and his many-jointed six legs were all moving quite elaborately.”

Baker says the images came to her at a time when she was “ready to rattle my own cage”. A cofounder of Toronto’s Dancemakers in the '70s and acclaimed member of New York’s Lar Lubovitch Dance Company in

the '80s, she spent the next couple of decades dancing her own expressive solos, as well as those by the likes of James Kudelka and Mark Morris. With that solo work coming to an end, and Baker preparing to create her first ensemble piece, here was a new source of inspiration: creatures that sense the world differently, and work together communally to build and survive.

“It’s been really fascinating to muse on that world, and the thing it did for me as a choreographer is it allowed for me to look at different ways for dancers to connect,” the artist says thoughtfully, adding of the artful insect videos: “They came into my life when I didn’t want to make something precipitated by my body and my feelings and my own world. They were stimulating a different pathway.”

The result of her study and experimentation is *coalesce*, a piece for three dancers: Sean Ling, Sahara Morimoto, and Andrea Nann. It is showing here in a double bill that features Baker herself, performing on the Firehall Arts Centre stage for the first time in 12 years. She appears in a duet called *armour*, by her New York collaborator Doug Varone, with dancer Larry Hahn. It, too, draws on the insect world, taking inspiration from Lewis Thomas’s *The Lives of a Cell*, and its observations about communication among social insects.

Don’t expect the performers to look exactly like bugs, however. Baker’s genius goes far beyond the literal. Instead, her trio uses arms and legs as if they were sensory devices—as Baker puts it, “not using hands for tactile touch but to close a synapse”. The effect is alien and exacting. “It’s kind of a utopian view of cooperation, too,” she adds. “There’s no conflict in it.”

That cooperation and communication also influence Varone’s piece, in which Hahn and Baker move, as the *New York Times* said in a review, like an “endlessly mutable jigsaw puzzle”.

If the movement marks a dramatically different direction for Baker, so too does her mode of presentation. The dance artist has called this show an “audio action tour”, in which she’ll spend the first part of the evening talking directly to the audience about the inspiration for and making of the pieces, showing video clips of Safdie’s work and other elements.

“It doesn’t have anything to do with the meaning of the work,” Baker stops to stress. “I don’t know what the meaning is. I do believe the way

we receive abstract art is very, very individual. I'm more interested in showing people what my methods and influences are. It's a little bit like creating a documentary to go with a performance."

Baker remembers how, earlier in her career, dance artists were loath to demystify their works in such a way. Times change, she realizes.

"People want to find the inside story about everything now. There's a genuine curiosity about finding out how things work. And this is an art form that is profound; it has ideas behind it," she says, then adds with characteristic ebullience: "I guess I'm just at the point where I'm more excited to share those things."

She says she'd much rather talk about her process before the show than after it. "Personally, I don't like postshow talks. Sometimes I don't even want to clap when it's great—I just want to keep the experience in my body and leave the theatre. I want to live with what I received."

In all, Vancouver audiences should expect to see a wholly different side of Baker than the one they saw at the Firehall a dozen years ago—though the same emotional honesty and expressive vibrancy will be there. At 61, Baker's creativity shows no sign of waning.

"I feel very renewed and absolutely rejuvenated," she says, and then explains that the loss of her spouse, composer Ahmed Hassan, in 2011 from multiple sclerosis altered her path. "I lost my husband three years ago, and I was his primary caregiver for him for a very long time and his death changed everything in my life. I needed to let my world change," she says. "In the aftermath of that, I've found a new way of practising my art. I feel like I'm in a new place and time in my life."

Peggy Baker Dance Projects' *coalesce & armour*—an audio action tour is at the Firehall Arts Centre from Wednesday to Saturday (January 8 to 11).

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