

WHAT'S ON

DANCE

Friends unite for sombre memorial

Red Brick program a tribute to composer Michael J. Baker

MICHAEL CRABB
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

When Canadian composer and conductor Michael J. Baker died of leukemia exactly 10 years ago he left two valuable legacies. One was his music. The other was the enduring force of his friendship. Both come together this week in a tribute program titled *Red Brick* that also launches Harbourfront Centre's Next Steps series.

The premature loss of Baker at age 51 triggered a wave of grief that swept through his international circle of friends and associates. And it was a large circle that extended far beyond the music world.

Edmonton-born Baker fell in love with dance early in his career, working as a much-admired dance accompanist after his 1971 move to Toronto. From the late 1970s on, his compositions, often influenced by American minimalism yet notably accessible, animated the work of some of the country's leading choreographers, including, among many others, his first wife, Peggy Baker, Vancouver's Karen Jamieson, Toronto's Patricia Beatty, Carol Anderson and Christopher House and, mostly during his years in Montreal, James Kudelka, with whom Baker collaborated on six ballets.

Kudelka confesses that he com-

missioned Baker to write the score for *In Paradisum*, "without knowing what his music sounded like." Kudelka says he simply liked Baker and thought he'd be fun to work with.

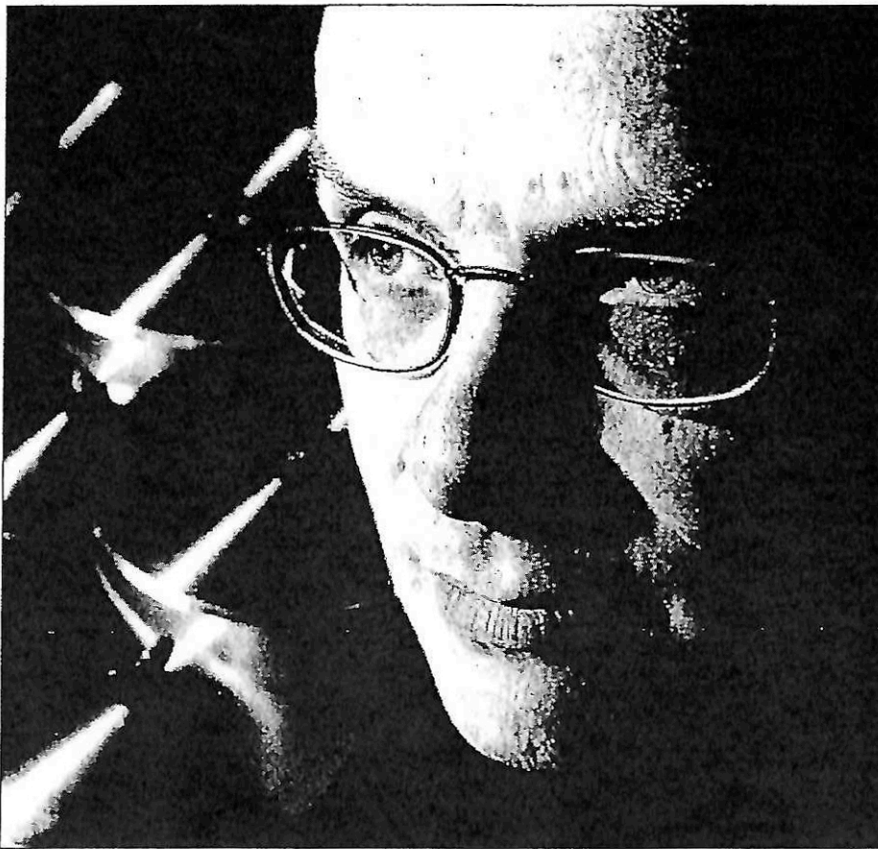
That elegiac yet vibrantly pulsating 1983 work for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens is hailed as a masterpiece, an indivisibly perfect marriage of music and movement.

Writes Carol Anderson in a program tribute: "Michael's music was like the big sky of his Alberta birthplace, soaring into emotional and spiritual terrain, embracing poetry and emotion in an organic way, quintessentially suited to dance."

A decade later, any lingering grief about Baker's early death has been replaced by deeply affectionate memories. The spirit of the tribute is celebratory and, as Baker would have appreciated, collaborative and innovative.

Dancer/choreographer Marie-Josée Chartier, the event's co-producer and Baker's partner for the last 17 years of his life, has joined forces with Arraymusic, the contemporary Toronto-based ensemble that he directed from 1993, to fashion a program of dance and music that includes revivals of earlier works — Kudelka's 1988 *C.V.* and Peggy Baker's 1997 *Encoded Revision* — along with brand new choreography.

The entire second half of the program is devoted to music from *Big Pictures*, Baker's 1992 Paul Klee-inspired collaboration with painter Dan Solomon and choreographer Bill James. The original comprised



RENE JOHNSTON/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

Canadian composer and conductor Michael J. Baker died of leukemia 10 years ago.

eight sections. Chartier has selected five, newly choreographing the *Red Brick* movement as a duet for herself and Valerie Calam. Serge Ben-nathan, former artistic director of Toronto's Dancemakers, a company with which Baker was closely connected, is choreographing to the *One Day* section and Heidi Strauss performs her own new choreography in a dance film she's made with Jeremy Mimmagh to *Girl In Morning*.

Array musicians, who will be on stage throughout, will also perform other, notable Baker compositions. And, of course, there will be the shared memories of a man Chartier describes as "a great guy with a killer smile."

Michael Baker was admired for his seemingly unflappable good nature, humility, sage-like wisdom and professionalism. He touched people profoundly in a way they've clearly not forgotten.

JUST THE FACTS

WHAT: Red Brick
WHEN: Friday to Sunday
WHERE: Fleck Dance Theatre, 207 Queens Quay W.
TICKETS: From \$25 at 416-973-4000 or harbourfrontcentre.com