

DANCING WITHOUT A SAFETY NET

In town as part of this year's Festival of New Dance, renowned Canadian contemporary dancer Peggy Baker talks to Elling Lien about her silent, solo dance piece, *Portal*.

One of the reasons why people have a hard time connecting with contemporary dance I think is they don't know what the purpose is. What do you think?

Yeah, they assume it's going to be something very concrete because we do things for reasons in our lives. I think dance, especially contemporary dance, it's this very unusual balance between abstract and actual. They're not necessarily related. I don't believe that when people are listening to music they're looking for meaning. They're assuming an experience of music. The same thing when they look at contemporary art. It's the mystery of the mind and sensibility that brought those elements together and the strange conflicts and the possibilities for meaning. It's not a singular meaning. Actually, I believe that the meaning the audience receives is the actual meaning. They're completing the work by their own perception of it.

So there's no incorrect reading...?

No. But I think that people are too caught up in whether they liked it or not. I think they feel they're supposed to be able to judge how good it was by how much they liked it. To me, those are the least important questions.

Two thumbs up!

[laughs] Yes, I think if people would just ask themselves, "What did I see?" they'd realize that they actually received something very unique to themselves.

So how do you get people to understand how to appreciate contemporary dance?

I think that's part of the role of people who are publishing about dance. It's the role of the presenter to provide pre-show talks or program notes or events that are public.

What kinds of things could the dance community and the publicity folks be doing differently?

I'll just give you an example of things I do. I do every year in Toronto a series of free performances. They happen in unusual places at unusual times of day. So maybe at a theatre that's not a dance theatre, or at the museum, or at the art gallery, or at a seniors' home. Sometimes they're over lunchtime or they're on a Sunday afternoon. They're free, and I call them *Inside the Art*. People who come to these performances hear me talking about the work and showing dances. Then we engage in a conversation about the work.

I've been doing that for at least 10 years and that's part of how I try to connect with

my audience in Toronto.

How did you decide to do that kind of thing?

I just needed to. I felt almost like I wasn't able to expand my reach into the community that I am a part of. I don't mean the dance community—I mean the community that I live in, like my neighborhood and the city that I live in. When I performed in Calgary a couple years ago, I actually came out and talked to the audience for the first 10 minutes of my show. I know that it's really demanding to look at one person dance for an hour. You're wondering "what is this?" So I told them a little bit about each dance and the various choreographers. I tried to free them up to be able to receive the performance. We need to be able to not be afraid to speak literally to the audience.

I'm doing in a dance called "Portal" in St. John's. It's a very, very stark dance. There's no music.

Silent!

I'm really sharing this darkened theater space with the audience. I'm on the stage but we're sharing the pressure of the silence, and the uncertainty. The lights keep going out and I reappear somewhere else on the stage in a different lighting effect. It really plays

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with perspective. Sometimes I look gigantic. Other times I look very, very small. It doesn't have any of the markers for us to understand beginning, middle and end because there's no music, there's no arc for the music, and because there's all these blackouts all the way along. I think it ends up being really, really exciting for the audience. The uncertainty that we often feel when we're seeing contemporary performance is amplified and becomes obvious that it's part of the whole idea of the piece. For me, this idea of *Portal*, which is a threshold to someplace brand new, becomes a metaphor for the stage space, for the experience and performance, for each tiny little segment of the dance itself.

So by making the work silent, it seems like you're confronting the audience, in a way. Raw contemporary dance.

I don't feel that it's confronting. I actually feel that it's just breaking down one more barrier. To me it feels like a dance that's very close to the bone. I'm taking away anything around it that would obscure the dance itself, and letting people just see what the dance is.

I just finished teaching a workshop in which everybody worked on their dance every single day, and we never used any of the

music. We worked in silence. It's just amazing how much more clear the dance is without the complication and scaffolding of the music. You are seeing the dance. When you reduce it down that far you can start to see what it is you're giving people and what are they receiving. The music often tells you how important or what the tone is, or if it's funny or sad or conflicted. The music is setting that up. When you don't have the music and the dancer needs to bring that clarity and precision to what they're doing, it's super exciting.

By the end of the week we didn't miss the music at all. We felt that we were receiving the dancing.

How could you see that in the students?

By their insightful comments about what they were looking at and the heightened precision and clarity of their dancing.

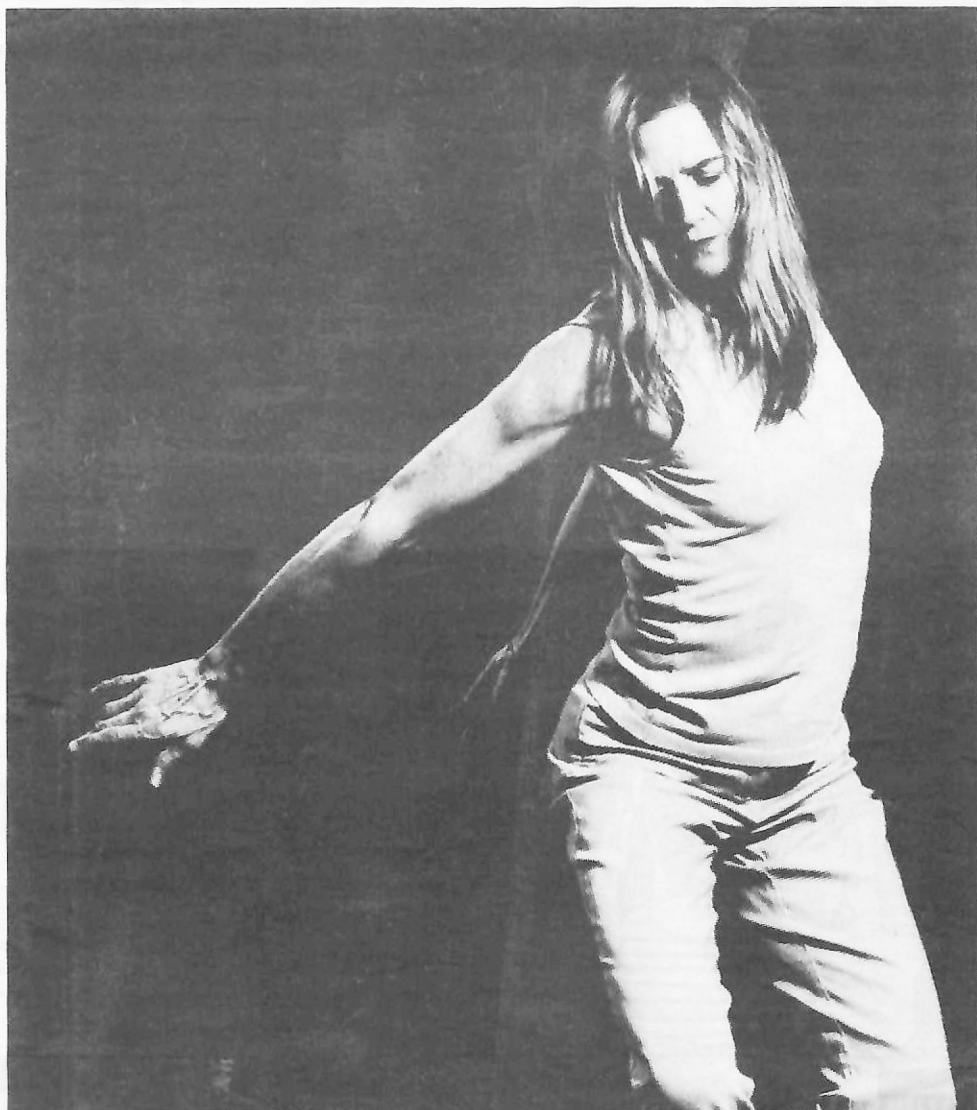
So they weren't doing a certain thing on a certain beat? They didn't have that to rely on.

Right. They had to embody the tempo and

dynamics. A lot of times dancers think they're doing things because the music is doing it. They think that their dancing is becoming exciting. Actually it hasn't changed at all. The music has become more exciting, but they haven't done anything with their dancing. I think the dancers lean on music far too much. I don't mean that we'd all be better off if dance had no music. No. But dancers spend too much time dancing to music and not enough time simply dancing. ■

Peggy Baker will be performing Portal as part of the Festival of New Dance. Special light design by Marc Parent. Lee Su-Feh's The Whole Beast, another solo work, is also on the bill. Monday September 20 & Tuesday, September 21 at 8pm. Tickets are \$15+ /\$20+ and are available at LSPU Hall—3 Victoria Street 753-4531.

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Peggy Baker—Photo by John Lauener