

# Homecoming for city's dance diva

## U of A famous alumna Peggy Baker back to teach this week

BY SALENA KITTINGHAM, EDMONTON JOURNAL    JULY 29, 2014



Peggy Baker performs in 2009. One of Canada's most influential modern dance artists, Baker is the distinguished guest teacher this week at the University of Alberta's Orchesis Dance Summer Intensive.

**Photograph by:** Cylla von Tiedemann, Supplied

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EDMONTON - Peggy Baker grew up in Edmonton tap dancing in community classes, shimmying down the sidewalk, and performing in living room musicals.

It wasn't until the Governor General Award-winning dance artist, born in 1952, was in theatre school at the University of Alberta in the late 1960s that she was first exposed to modern dance through the student troupe Orchesis Modern Dance.

The discovery was a revelation.

"I completely fell in love with modern dance through that experience with Orchesis," says Baker. "It was my entry into my adult life, really. I have very vivid memories of the rehearsals. Of the warm-ups. The performances. We made a trip to Calgary one year by bus with our sleeping bags. I remember sleeping in my bag in some huge area in the students' union building at the University of Calgary. To travel for a performance, it was a really big thrill. I also remember the subject matter of the work. There was a piece with text by T.S. Eliot, work that dealt with the civil rights movement. It was an opening to more sophisticated ideas, the kinds of topics dance could tackle, the kinds of subject

matter that could be integrated with dance. It was profound.”

Thunderstruck by her first encounter with modern dance, she set aside her theatre studies and bid her hometown of Edmonton a fond farewell at the age of 19 to pursue modern dance.

In Toronto she co-founded Dancemakers in 1974. Then she was off to New York City and across the continent dancing in Lar Lubovitch’s company in the 1980s, and with the likes of Mikhail Baryshnikov and Mark Morris with their White Oak Project in the early 1990s. In the past two decades she has carved out a distinguished solo career based with her Toronto-based Peggy Baker Dance Projects, taking up artistic residence with the National Ballet of Canada in 1994, heading their modern dance program to this day.

Remarkable to think that such an illustrious modern dance career traces back to Edmonton’s Orchesis Modern Dance. Founded by dance educator Dorothy Harris in 1964 to provide students with a chance to dance in an extracurricular performance context, Orchesis is one of the oldest student organizations at the University of Alberta. As the local dance group prepares to celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2015, Orchesis welcomes its most prominent alumna back to the fold this week.

Baker is back on campus teaching contemporary dance technique classes and a course on creative practice, tapping into her huge catalogue and generously sharing it with local dancers refining work that already exists or working toward the creation of a new dance work.

Once Baker has completed this week’s summer intensive classes, she says she will have a better sense of the current vibe at Orchesis and be prepared to set a piece of choreography for the group to perform at their 50th anniversary celebrations in January.

Her plan at the time of our conversation was to riff on a section from her recent piece, *land / body / breath*, a dance installation her Peggy Baker Dance Projects created within the Thomson Collection of Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario last May. Dancers moved among the landscapes of Tom Thomson, Emily Carr, the Group of Seven, and other iconic outdoor painted scenes of Canada to live improvised vocals of folk songs, throat singers and Canadian pop.

“It was an hour long and it had some really exciting elements in it,” says Baker of *land / body / breath*. “What I’d like to do is pull one of those elements out and explore it in more detail as a shorter piece for Orchesis.”

Baker will set and rehearse the piece over one week in October and during that artistic residency in Edmonton, she will perform at City Hall on Oct. 26 at 3:30 p.m. an autobiographical piece called *The Disappearance of Right and Left*. This piece was commissioned by Baker 10 years ago from Sarah Chase, a Canadian choreographer of a younger generation. *The Disappearance of Right and Left* brilliantly weaves Baker’s own stories with her looping, abstract gestures.

“It is a successful way to connect with people that don’t know my dancing or maybe don’t see a lot of modern dancing very often,” says Baker. “Of course I love doing it in Alberta because so much of it takes place here. So many images. It has an absolutely direct connection with the people in Alberta.”