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In dance icon Peggy Baker's Phase Space, time is a flat circle

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Dancer Sarah Fregeau opens her mouth and screams.

The noise, which rips across Studio 5B of Toronto's National Ballet School, is as incredible as it is ear-piercing – think somewhere between electrical feedback and what might ring from the throat of a bat. If Fregeau weren't standing in front of me, I'd never guess it was human-made.

Moments later, dancer Ric Brown is balancing on a chair and howling. The howls begin modestly, then build into rough, gnashing, animalistic bellows. I'm sitting only a few feet from him and the intensity is overwhelming – the sounds are uncannily real.

Suddenly, the noises stop and a woman steps forward to give the dancers notes. "Don't become too pensive," she tells Fregeau. "Make the squishy sounds louder and leave them sooner." Then the woman turns to Brown and beams. "Those howls – I *love*. They have so much appetite."

This montage of otherworldly sounds is part of a rehearsal for *Phase Space*, the latest creation by one of Canada's most renowned dance artists, Peggy Baker. The work is composed of four parts – Baker calls them "micro-worlds of composition" – and features six of her company dancers: Ric Brown, Sarah Fregeau, Kate Holden, Sean Ling, Sahara Morimoto and Andrea Nann.

Phase Space takes its name from a modelling system used by physicists. Baker came across the term while researching for *locus plot*, her elegant, mathematics-themed work that premiered last year in Toronto to critical acclaim. She couldn't get over how well the concept captured her own approach to composition: The model expresses the instability of space and the non-linearity of time through a process of folding, compressing and stretching. "I thought: That's *exactly* what I do," Baker tells me.

Once the dancers have left the studio for the day, we're able to talk in more detail. Baker speaks with unself-conscious warmth, gesturing with her large, expressive hands to draw out certain points.

"I'm in a new chapter of my creative life," she says, referring, in part, to her recent retirement as performer. It's a retirement she's not overly strict about; she interrupted it on a whim last fall to collaborate with Arcade Fire violinist Sarah Neufeld.

But she's also referring to her ever-increasing obsession with teamwork. "Collaborating has allowed me to completely transcend the structures of my own solo performance life. And I've always been interested in deepening artistic relationships."

Phase Space is a collaboration on every level. At its most foundational, it draws on the specializations of three very different artists: Baker is responsible for movement and composition, Fides Krucker for "vocalography," and composer/pianist John Kameel Farah will create and perform live electronic music.

Krucker is the woman responsible for the mad sounds that, moments before, were tearing through studio 5B. (Peggy Baker has been artist-in-residence at the National Ballet School since 1992.) Krucker's background is in contemporary opera and traditions of embodied voice.

She first collaborated with Baker at a cultural offshoot of the Vancouver Paralympics in 2010. Baker was working on a piece for a solo dancer and a vocalist in a wheelchair and needed someone to reconstruct a vocal score by her husband, composer Ahmed Hassan (who died in 2011). She knew Krucker only by reputation and asked if she'd be able to help.

"In the rehearsal room, I loved everything she was doing," Baker says. "Every invention gave me another idea. I said to her: We need to do an original project."

Baker's collaboration with Farah, an award-winning classical pianist and composer, started at about the same time. Music has always been central to Baker's practice; throughout her solo career, she'd established a long-standing partnership with Canadian concert pianist Andrew Burashko. Playing from memory, Burashko accompanied her through a huge repertoire of choreography, playing both classical and contemporary pieces. But as Baker shifted her focus away from performing, and Burashko became increasingly busy with the Art of Time Ensemble, Baker found herself in need of a new musician.

She was also curious to see what would happen when music was not the primary motive behind her choreography. "I wanted a complete reversal of the standard approach, in which music is chosen first and then dancing built accordingly."

The first attempt at this came via a collaboration with Farah called *Aleatoric Solo No. 1* (2013) and *Aleatoric Duet No. 2* (2014). Baker created the choreography in rehearsal, then Farah spontaneously composed and performed musical accompaniment onstage. Similarly, in *locus plot*, Farah was integrated into the process only once the movement and vocalizations were set. He watched what Baker and Krucker had come up with, and proceeded to compose modernist-sounding piano sequences, interspersed with beat-driven electronic music, to complement the pre-existing composition.

With *Phase Space*, Baker wants to give Farah an opportunity to explore a structured middle ground between these two approaches. While he'll have a blueprint of the soundscape, Farah's modus operandi will still be largely improvisational. He'll sit in a booth 12 feet above the stage and respond live to the performance as it unfolds.

“There are infinite ways to improvise,” Farah tells me. “Each time I see the work, I respond differently and I try to balance that with the moments I’ve previously discovered and want to keep. There’s a tension between rhythmic and arrhythmic, floating rhythms and zany sounds, then the last piece is just purely, straight-up beautiful. Peggy lets me express these radically different sides of myself; she wants to exploit that in the best way.”

Phase Space is also collaborative in what it demands of its six dancers. Baker was determined not to invent any new movement for the piece; instead, she asked each member of the ensemble to come to rehearsal with 10 minutes of choreography from her previous work – steps and sequences they had grown attached to, that still lived inside their bodies and felt specially memorable.

Baker’s objectives with this are twofold. First, she wants to focus on her own understanding of composition, tightening the parameters of her creativity by limiting the vocabulary of her steps. (She likens the exercise to fridge-magnet poetry: You can say anything, but only with the available words.)

Second, she wants to create room for her dancers to be interpreters on their own terms – an imperative at the crux of all her new work.

“It’s what I was allowed in my solo career, and in my work with Lar Lubovitch’s company [in New York]. He gave us so much responsibility to carry his repertoire. It really liberated me as a solo dancer; it was such a priceless gift. I never used a rehearsal director – I didn’t want things fixed up from the outside. I wasn’t trying to get someone to think things looked really good; I was working from an internal channel to embody the vision of the choreographer.”

Baker thinks the micro-managing of performance is one of the weaknesses in the dance world. It’s an approach she dogmatically rejects.

“I want to see how the dancers bring themselves to the work. I’m not trying to live out my dancing desires in their bodies. These days, I want to say as little as possible.”

Phase Space is presented by Peggy Baker Dance Projects from Jan. 22-31 at the Betty Oliphant Theatre in Toronto (peggybakerdance.com [<http://peggybakerdance.com/upcoming/phase-space>]).

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