

Peggy Baker wins Governor General's Award for Performing Arts

Peggy Baker, NBS' Artist-in-Residence since 1991, was recently awarded the coveted Governor General's Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Performing Arts, along with R. Murray Schafer, Clémence DesRochers, Édith Butler, Robert Lepage, George F. Walker, and James D. Fleck, named for the Ramon John Hnatyshyn Award for Voluntarism. The Governor General's Awards were presented in Ottawa in May.

Prior to the awards ceremony, Peggy shared some of her thoughts around awards, modern dance and continuing to be a performer.

"Winning an award is always a surprise, but more so, it is an overwhelming honour, because every nomination is put forward by one's colleagues.

"Modern dance is at the cutting edge of the dance world, and within this world I've had the opportunity to work with a host of great dancers in rare situations (including Mark Morris and Mikhail Baryshnikov). I choreograph for myself and others, I commission composers and other choreographers, I teach. So perhaps on some level I'm being recognized for the breadth of the roles I occupy in the realm of modern dance.

"I arrived at NBS at the invitation of Mavis Staines in 1988. I was living in New York City at the time, but moved to Toronto in 1991. Being Artist-in-Residence has allowed me the huge advantage of continuity and stability in my dance life. My creative life is centred at the School. I'm joined in the NBS studios by dancers, choreographers, designers, a host of artists who collaborate in and contribute to my work. The time and space afforded by being Artist-in-Residence at NBS have been crucial to my ability to pursue my artistic practice.

"I believe modern dance training is essential for ballet students if they want to have the broadest possible choice of where to pursue their professional dance career. Modern dance technique is based in a wide-ranging complex of movement principles devised by the first generation creators in modern dance: Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Doris Humphrey and José Limón, Lester Horton. Today's ballet students need to be fluent in the movement vocabulary of those choreographers.

"Teaching here at the School has allowed me to develop a unique pedagogical approach. The students bring a very high skill set to my classes and they need to be introduced to modern dance through elaborate choreographic structures in order to get them fired up!

"As for the length of my career, it's partially due to circumstances. I have a sound body, I have loved to do the work, I didn't have children, none of my injuries totally sidelined me, and in my late 30s I took full charge of my creative life and shifted my focus to solo dancing.

"The most important advice I can give to my students is to keep their heart in the work."

