

## The Sybil : Meredith Monk

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*Meredith Monk est venue deux fois à Paris en 1979-1980. Une première fois avec une « performance » à la chapelle de la Sorbonne, une deuxième fois à Nanterre avec un spectacle intitulé Recent Ruins. On la connaissait déjà par Paris/Chaconne (1974), Concert pour une voix et un verre, et surtout, en 1975, aux Bouffes du Nord, Education of the Girlchild. Depuis 1968 elle a sa compagnie, The House. Sa formation : la musique, instrumentale et vocale, la chorégraphie, la mise en scène, indissociables. Il est difficile de mettre une étiquette sur son art. Juice en 1969 était une « cantate théâtrale », Vessel en 1971 un « opéra épique ». Elle-même parle volontiers d'« opéra non verbal ». Un de ses plus beaux spectacles, à New York en 1976, s'intitulait Quarry. C'était un « opéra en trois mouvements » — « Berceuse », « Marche » et « Requiem », une épopée des temps modernes évoquant l'Holocauste, à travers les souvenirs et l'imagination d'une petite fille malade, tout en blanc sur son lit blanc. Recent Ruins explore l'idée que l'archéologie pourrait être une façon de voir.*

Marie-Claire PASQUIER. — *How much of your personal memories and of your personal history goes into what you do?*

Meredith Monk. — *I think a piece like Quarry had more to do with personal memory than this piece Recent Ruins, because although I was actually a baby during World War II, I feel it has affected my generation, it has become mythic. I did an internal, or a subconscious version of it*

which I felt was the only way in which I could deal with it truthfully. This piece is much more objective. In a sense, it deals with the collective unconscious, it also deals with both the origins of civilization and the future.

M.-C. P. — *Are you interested in people's identifying the cultural references?*

M. M. — Basically, what I am trying to make is a theatre or a performance that is evocative, that will touch off something in each spectator's mind, like a memory, or a dream, that he did not know he had. I try to load, to compress the energy as much as I can, so that it may have as much evocative strength as possible. In the section in which you see all the contemporary objects mixed with very old ones, I wanted the spectators to have a sense that they were looking at this civilization from a Martian's point of view. Somebody looking back, a thousand years from now, and saying : « What is this object, what is this vacuum cleaner? »

M.-C. P. — *Archeology applied to the present day?*

M. M. — Yes. It is almost a circular structure, it has both the past and the future in it. What is important to me is that the piece should convey a sense of time and a sense of ephemerality.

M.-C. P. — *What is the articulation between the images and the music?*

M. M. — I worked on the music first, it was a complete work in itself. Then I thought it would be interesting to do a piece beginning like a formal music concert, and then theatrical elements start building in. But most of the time, in some of the other pieces like *Quarry* or *Education of the Girlchild*, I work on all the elements at the same time, I work on the images at the same time that I am writing the music. For the last few years, I have been really concentrating on the music, to the point of asking myself: am I really interested in the theatre at all?

I wanted to figure out a form in which the music would have its own integrity, in which it could stand by itself. In fact it has all the images within it. It is not music in a geometric sense, it touches off pictures.

The way I work is very much like a mosaicist. Small bits of information apparently unrelated that accumulate or are woven into whole. The continuity is musical.

M.-C. P. — *Why do you use « imitations of words » instead of the words themselves?*

M. M. — Because I feel that the voice itself is a language, and that using words is redundant. The text can be, in a way, a barrier. I think the human voice can express pure emotion independently of situation, context and story. Yes it is true it has a conversational quality to it, I don't object to this. In a certain way, it translates much better. When the Japanese see my work, they get the emotions of it. If you are working on the feelings, the people get it, even if the manifestation of feelings is different in different cultures. A few years ago I had a chance to see Kabuki theatre in New York, a Japanese critic brought me there, and I was stunned, because I realized that, although I had never seen it before, I was working in the same areas. The movement quality reminded me of my own movement, and also the integration of elements into one form, the fact that a performer could go from being a singer to an actor to a dancer in a ten minute period. This flexibility of performance was something that I had been working towards. It was very exciting for me and confirming, I didn't feel so much alone.

M.-C. P. — *It seems that you like to include « real space » in your pieces.*

M. M. — Yes, I love to work in real spaces in live theatre, because then I can make my images as magical or as fantasy-like as I want. I would love to do a piece in that particular place where we shot the film (Ellis Island). The idea of the work is, in a sense, to try to renew the way people see. If it is done in a real space, it would not be such an abstract theatre space and maybe people could leave and see things in a fresh way.

M.-C. P. — *Wouldn't you say that in Recent Ruins your men's voices were more « religious » than your women's?*

M. M. — Frankly, I have always thought that women have a closer connection to spiritual energy than men do. The archetype of the Sybil or Oracle is one that is very related to singing. The oracle let the energy go through her, and then the voices came out of her. This receptivity or sensitivity is something that women usually are in touch with. But men such as the traditional Shaman in American Indian cultures, or sorcerers also have this quality. In *Recent Ruins* I don't think the men's voices are more religious. The purity of the Women's voices also has a spiritual quality. I think I was working more with the contrasts of quality.

M.-C. P. — *In Vessel, why did you become interested in the figure of Joan of Arc?*

M. M. — I saw her as a fighting female — a heroine — a person outside of society who had to follow her own inside truth and act on it no matter what the consequences were. Also I was

interested in her as the Saint, one possessed by voices, by God through voices in the same way that the Sybil or the oracle was. I also saw her as a metaphor for an artist who is in tune with his or her internal « voices » and also with energy going through the « air » and who creates from that kind of truth.

M.-C. P. — *Were you influenced by anyone in particular?*

M. M. — When I was in school at Sarah Lawrence, I had a wonderful teacher named Bessie Schönberg. She is still alive and very active at over 70 years old. She was the director of the Theatre and Dance Department. She taught opera workshop and dance composition and dance history.

MC. P. — *Are you interested at all in Gertrude Stein?*

M. M. — I admire her very much, I love her work on a certain level, but I don't feel close to her. Structurally I am very much interested, but I feel that my work has a more primal sort of feeling than hers. *What Are Masterpieces*, I love that book, it is an incredible book. I also love *The Making of Americans*. Every year they have this reading in New York which goes on for two days, I have participated in that, everybody has a time and reads for half an hour. Every time I read it, whatever it is, by chance, I feel she's got us all covered, she's just got everybody, I feel it is always talking to me somehow, it is talking to everybody. The only theatrical piece that I have seen was *What Happened*, it was great.

M.-C. P. — *Does « postmodern » mean anything to you?*

M. M. — I am increasingly unclear as to what the word « postmodern » means, the more I read about it. If it means a return to a kind of hybrid form, rich in its contrasts and asymmetries, and a return to multi-dimensionality in terms of content, materials and intention, then I am postmodern.