

# E A R T H I



**D**ancer/choreographer

*Maida Withers stalks her audience,  
grabs and tugs them into  
her realm of primitive earth.*

*"Art is the vehicle to acknowledge the power within us.*

*As an artist for the earth," she says, "I try  
to focus on power from within, not power over  
the planet...a reverence, a nurturing to make  
both the self whole and the earth whole."*

# A N C E R

**M**aida Withers is professor of theatre and dance at The George Washington University and director of Maida Withers' Dance Construction Company of Washington, D.C. Known as a master experimenter, she pushes the boundaries of contemporary performance to encompass systems unexplored. Her artistic theology combines ancient myth and scientific process, technology and aesthetics, and cultures aboriginal and new age. Reaching out to touch universal forces, Withers strives for explanation. "Artists are a positive and empowering force, a force for creation," she says.

bridging the classic and the new frontier. Last year, her pioneering spirit and sense of artistic custody for culture, society, and ecology compelled Withers to join other artists in Brazil for the "Earth Summit" — the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro.

The Earth Summit in 1992 was a multi-layered event. At one level, it was a summit meeting of world leaders to sign environmental treaties. On another level, thousands of activists gathered, to network and lobby. To complement these gatherings, artists came to Brazil to create an artistic and philosophical statement,

"Working with the most advanced technology and the simplest rituals, we are joining with others and the forces in the universe to bring about transformation through the spirit. Transform the spirit and new systems will evolve to support the vision."

Through the transformation of the artist as she interacts with the earth and natural elements, Withers leads her audience toward a global vision — evolutionary, interconnected, existentially whole. She has been an active member of the growing movement of international artists for ecology since 1987, when she began working on performance projects at land sites in the Four Corners area of the Southwestern United States, sacred lands inhabited for centuries by Native American peoples. Withers grew up in Utah, and the Southwest stirs in her reminiscences of earlier times, personal as well as anthropological. "For me, living on wilderness earth sites brings me into immediate contact with the powers of nature," Withers says. "It is like receiving a gift of knowledge. As an artist, I ask, how can we use this offering from nature to create our own environment? How can we engage the public in a new perception?"

Her dance is sweeping and bold. With strong frame and chiseled face, she evokes the pioneer of the West, scouting new horizons. She is the innovator,

THERE'S MORE THAN  
ONE WAY TO SAVE A PLANET.  
ENVIRONMENTALLY COMMITTED  
ARTIST AND PROFESSOR  
MAIDA WITHERS  
TOOK HER COMPANY TO THE  
EARTH SUMMIT IN RIO TO SHOW  
REVERENCE FOR THE EARTH.



one that offered alternative methods of improving the quality of life on earth and celebrated cultural and ecological diversity.

The Brazilian National Movement of Artists for Nature invited more than 100 artists to Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, before the Earth Summit to participate in the OMAME Project, an international congress of visual and performing artists for ecology. (Omame is a Yanomami Indian word meaning "creative manifestation of all things.") The goals were to establish an inventive dialogue about world ecological and social change, and create new networks and partnerships among international and Brazilian artists. The conference was also an effort to draw the attention of the Brazilian government,

through the arts, to environmental concerns.

Working with the Brazilian group, Withers organized a six-week tour to Brazil, funded by The George Washington University, private contributors, and the National Endowment for the Arts through the D.C. Commission for the Arts.

Withers chose talented and inventive young dance artists from Washington, D.C., to accompany her. The dancers, performers with the Dance Construction Company and students or alumni of GW, were Dana Tai Soon Burgess, Sandra Kammann, Stacy Palatt and Janine Ploetz. Dancers spent two weeks in Brasilia,

Facing page:  
Maida Withers  
dances on  
Utah's Coral  
Dunes.  
Left: Withers'  
work is  
performed on  
Sugar Loaf  
Mountain in  
Rio de Janeiro.

By  
Shawn  
Tate

taking part in the OMAME Project, and four weeks in Rio de Janeiro as participants in the Earth Summit.

On the opening night of the OMAME Project, Withers and her group performed to a sold-out house of conference delegates and public patrons at the prestigious National Theatre. Withers premiered her work "Rolling Thunder," a ritualistic contemporary dance narrative, created specifically for the Earth Summit and incorporating five guest performers and a sculptor from Brasilia.

In the four parts of "Rolling Thunder," the audience follows Withers on an evolutionary path,

her dance video "Sands Cycles." Influenced by writings on myth, the video's visual poetry describes a woman's journey of Self, similar to Joseph Campbell's "heroes journey." With Verabel Call Cluff on camera, Maida Withers moves through the White Sands of New Mexico and Coral Dunes of Utah, exploring connections to the land and to the mysteries of change and survival in a stark wilderness environment.

After two weeks in Brasilia, artists came together at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Here, the dancers from GW attended presentations on environmental topics, while continuing to perform with

international artists on projects that related social and environmental themes, and conducting workshops for Rio's professional dancers.

On June 6, the Washington dancers performed for the opening of seven exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio. With more than 10,000 conference dignitaries and others in attendance, Withers and her troupe created a site-specific work in the outdoor stone garden at the museum. Environmental artist Keiki Prince from M.I.T. set the stage by lighting and wetting some of the large, smooth rocks. Through gleam and shadow, the dancers crawled across the rocks, flattened against them, moving imperceptibly. With musical accompaniment by Harold Gent and to the penetrating sound of sculptor Ken Hiratsuka as he carved a symbolic path

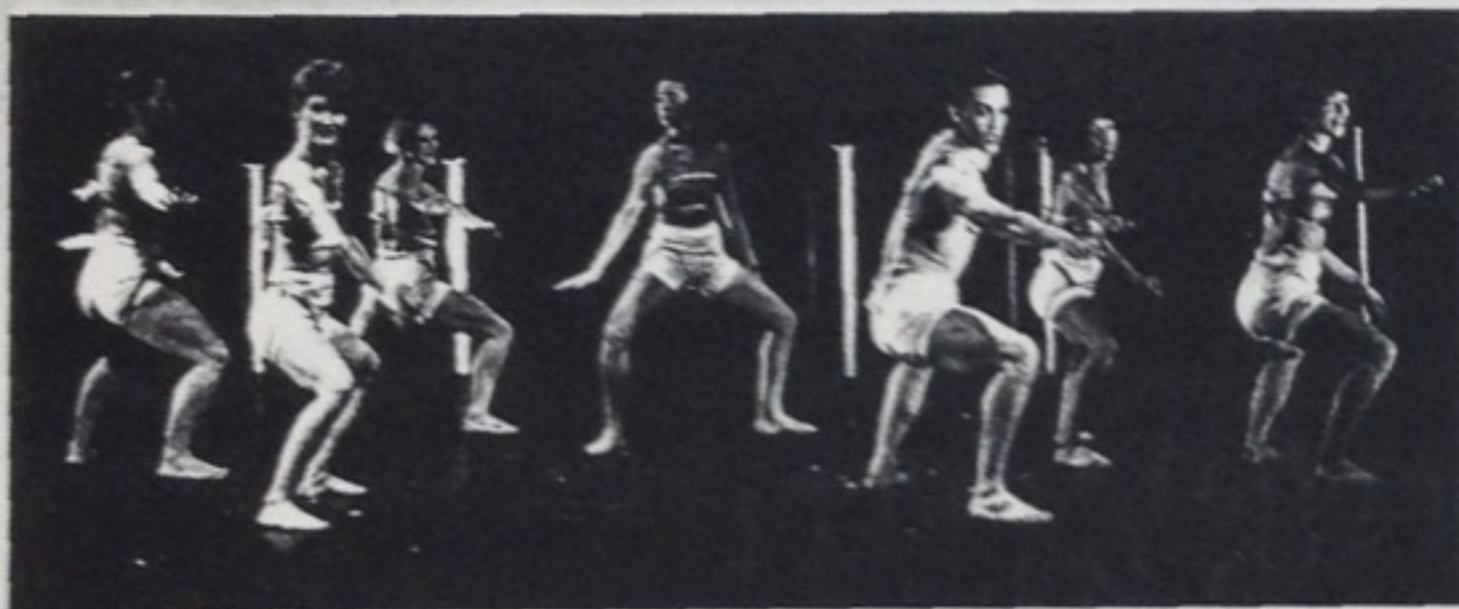
on a rock in the garden, the artists appeared to *become* the earth, to fuse with the rocks as they traveled, barely detectable, across the garden. The message of unity between person and planet could hardly be clearer.

On the final day of the summit, artists from the OMAME Project reassembled to confirm their commitment to the environment. The artists, in ritual performances, staged their tributes to the ancient elements: earth, air, water, fire and ether. On Sugar Loaf Mountain, overlooking the city of Rio de Janeiro, they joined in symbolic gesture and contemporary expression to profess their desire to protect, preserve and communicate with all life.

Reflecting on the conference and the goals of environmental artists, Maida Withers says, "We cannot go back to another time. But to move forward requires a union or marriage of science, art and technology. Through our work as artists, through our reverence and remembrance, we can, perhaps, return power to nature." **GW**

*Shawn Tate is a public affairs specialist at The George Washington University.*

A RITUALISTIC CONTEMPORARY DANCE NARRATIVE,  
"ROLLING THUNDER" WAS CREATED SPECIFICALLY  
FOR THE EARTH SUMMIT,  
INCORPORATING FIVE GUEST PERFORMERS AND  
A SCULPTOR FROM BRASILIA.



L.A. WITHERS

carrying humankind from self-absorption and exploitation to a new balanced relationship with the earth elements and all living things. The journey opens as the "Messenger Eagle" soars with outstretched arms evoking the aerial glide of a mythical bird, delivering the divine message to all who can hear. As the dance evolves, humans travel with "Spirit Figures" — elements of nature juxtaposed with the human spirit — through "Still Rush" toward "Transformation," aware of natural forces and living in interdependence with all life. In the final sequence, dancers wearing high-tech cylindrical headgear performing futuristic ritual proclaim their passage through a fiber-optic light sculpture to unification and empowerment. Decelerating, motion fades and focus rests on the lone sway of the Eagle Messenger, rhythmically coasting into darkness.

Withers views "Rolling Thunder" as a new world myth for the 21st century, a combination of the ancient and modern. She says, "In all my work I ask, 'What is the myth for the future?'"

During the film and video exhibition that was part of the OMAME gathering, Withers also premiered