



Brook Andrews performs in "Laser Dance," which premiered last night at Lisner Auditorium.

## Dance

# Striking 'Laser'

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Those friendly enemies—art and technology—were cozying up to one another again last night at Lisner Auditorium, where the multimedia "Laser Dance" had its world premiere.

It's a bold, imaginative, frequently striking, decidedly space-age enterprise. If, in the end, it remains something of an enigma—its intentions and theme elusive, the logic of its unfolding only intermittently convincing—it is no less admirable for its seriousness, its technical achievement, its vaulting artistic ambition.

Nothing in the work surpassed the shock and stimulation of the opening—the metallic clangor of electronic synthesizers shaking one's pulse; eerie, pencil-thin rays of emerald light streaking overhead through the auditorium and cleaving the stage space into Euclidean grandeur; tubes of fog rolling into the darkness, flicking and glinting around the rays; and a cadre of dancers in ruby red jumpsuits and eye goggles, slowly gyrating and appearing to float weightlessly in some extraterrestrial void. A spectacle out of the "Star Wars" era, who knows how distant—or close—in time to come.

"Laser Dance" is a collaboration, two years in the making, between choreographer Maida Withers, visual artist Rockne Krebs, and composer-musician Bob Boden, with additional input from lighting designer William DeMull, costumer Liliane Fortna, guest guitarist Robert Goldstein, and the dancers (nine, including Withers) of the Dance Construction Company. As a joint creative venture by three major Washington artists, produced entirely under Washington auspices and funded, except for a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts/Inter-Arts Program, by Washington businesses, institutions and patrons, it qualifies as a genuine landmark. The coproducers were the Dance Construction Company and District Curators, Inc.; the latter group has become the prime entrepreneur in the field of new performance arts in this city, and this latest venture is very much in line with its "cutting edge" approach.

One of the gratifying things about events of this kind is the unusual, melting-pot audience

they tend to attract. Though "Laser Dance" could be (mistakenly) regarded as a dance piece with high-tech trimmings, the enthusiastic crowd at Lisner last night was by no means your garden-variety dance audience, but a crossover mixture from a variety of orbits.

The multiple media of "Laser Dance" are interdependent and interactive. As the dancers move, flanked by the lasers and surrounded by an ocean of sound, their bodies intercept the light beams, and thereby trigger prerecorded shifts in the synthesized music.

There seemed to be strengths and weaknesses in each component. The choreography at its best—in a slow, sensuous passage for couples, for instance, or the climactic section in which the dancers strode on and manipulated large stilts—extended Withers' accustomed rangy, angular idiom into novel shapes and textures. But other sequences, especially a long one minus the lasers, looked to be aimless busywork. Nor was it easy to discern a governing form for the whole, especially since the dancers were mostly treated as interchangeable atoms.

For the most part, Boden's score, with its diverse chuggings, whooshings, clinkings and booms, proved enormously apt and effective, but it too had a less inspired side, lapsing into monotonous patterning of meager interest.

The laser structures had a brilliance and atmosphere of their own, at once intense and ghostly, static and shimmering, suggesting now a cosmic corral and then an intergalactic cathedral of light; there was also something ominous about them, like Darth Vader's sword. But their linear configurations, though they mutated from time to time, seemed ultimately too minimal for comfort—one can be fascinated by a pentagon for just so long.

The work is divided into six sections, with titles like "Departure," "Quest," and "Rites," and Withers has called the piece "a commentary on the struggle of cultures to absorb technology." But this concept is only sporadically or fuzzily manifest in what one sees and hears, and the import of the "commentary" is unclear. It might be closer to the mark to say that "Laser Dance" presents the problem, but not a solution. In any case, it's an intriguing and thought-provoking opus.

The performance will be repeated tonight.