



MAIDA WITHERS

by Michelle Higgins

In Washington, DC "Local is national," says Maida Withers, a local artist and professor of dance at the George Washington University. While balancing careers in both art and dance, she probes this dual image of the nation's capital toward a global vision.

She was the driving force for the dance movement in Washington in the 80's, when movement was under exploration and conventional dance modes were being challenged. She is also well known for her collaborative work with local and international artists today. Arriving in the early 80's, Withers jumped right into the politics of DC.



While some may argue that the political agenda of Washington leaves no room for the arts, Withers claims that dance is political in nature. Questioning the working of politics as well as her own political activism has driven her choreography from early works focusing on issues such as women, family, and the equal rights movement to present endeavors involving human relationships and ecology.

Now, rather than focusing on one political statement, Withers has the politics of the body speak for itself through a question when you are driven by a question that is your motivation," she says. The political history is asking questions for the purpose of human better and much is reflected

in a method of questioning at the early age of 18, when she attended a summer dance workshop at Connecticut College. "I went to a meeting in the evening to listen to a person deliver a lecture and it happened to be John Cage. I didn't know who John Cage was, I don't think. I don't remember if I knew! I was new. I sat there and watched him read from 90 letter sized pieces of paper—each one had a word, a sentence, a paragraph, three paragraphs, the whole page filled with words—with a stop watch as he read each page for one minute. And that was his performance! It took me several years to understand how this was art, why it was art, what I was doing there—what my role as audience was, but what I learned from that was that the question in art is probably more profound than the answer." Withers was coming into contact with the likes of Erick Hawkins, Martha Graham, and Merce Cunningham at about the same time as her experience with Cage. Later she went on to teach at Purchase for three years before taking a post at Howard University. The following year, she began a long partnership with the George Washington University where she holds the position of dance director and full professor.

At the University, she began to invite a stream of guest artists. Early guests include Yvonne Rainer, Meredith Monk, and Anna Halprin. Today she continues to bring the cutting edge to GW and DC with this year's artists including Ann Carlson and Claire Foster. She admits, "I never saw a distinction between research and my work. In my role as a University person, I feel I have a lot of responsibility to the community because I feel institutions bear a lot of responsibility to the neighborhood in which they live, which for me is Washington, DC." Withers continues to bring the cutting edge to Washington from around the world not only in her role as a professor, but in her own collaborations. Her most recent event in DC, "The DC Third International Dance Improvisation Festival" brought dancers, actors, students, and artists together from all over the globe.

Southwestern in conjunction with "Seeing JAZZ" which showcased artworks and literature inspired by jazz from around the world. Dance workshops to investigate movement and discussing the "why's and how's" of the art of dance improvisation were part of the festival in addition. "Expect the Unexpected," an open-script performance of spontaneous choreography, which was the culmination of the event.

While she is open to, and often prefers, collaborative works in which each dancer contributes their history and ideas to the community, Withers is selective in choosing who she works with, bringing only the best to DC. Among the select for the jazz event were: Kasie Duck and Vincent Cecalano (dancers) and Michael Vatcher (musician) of the Magpie dance and music company, Amsterdam; Wen Hui (dancer) of Living Dance Studio, Beijing, China; Gloria McLean (dancer) of Lifedance; Gloria McLean & Dancers, NYC; Cyrus Kamboza (dancer) and Rob Kinos (dancer and actor) of Phiffi! Dance Theater Company, NYC; Sharon Mansur and Daniel Burkholder (dancers). Quiescence dance performance group, Washington, DC; Joseph Mills (dancer), Jim Lery and Peter Fraize (musicians) of GWU; Reggie Crump and Sarah Slier of Maida Withers Dance Construction Company. By bringing accomplished international and local artists such as these together to create and perform works, Withers stands at the forefront of dance in DC.

Even among these dancers in their prime, the magnetic movements, unpredictability, and witness of Maida Withers often took the spotlight. In the single performance of "Seeing JAZZ MOVIE" her dynamics ranged from boisterously singing at the top of her lungs to a subtlety of movement in which even her soft, wispy hair was made to dance. At 61, Withers admits that people are often shocked at her stamina and technical aptitude after they have seen her perform. Yet, at the George Washington

be, can't always keep up in her two hour technique classes or 6 hour rehearsals. On continuing to dance and to choreograph dance, Maida claims, "My experience has taught me that when I feel I've cornered myself, and that I have no way out or way to step forward, I oddly discover that it's not whether to continue but how. It's like life." She adds, "I think my life is my art and my art is my life. I don't know that the two are separated. One is maybe more public than the other, but I'm not even sure of that."

Withers' vitality is mirrored in the risks taken by her dancers. When Withers asks her dancers to take risks, however, she does not necessarily mean in the controlled environment of the dance studio. Her request is stems from her own daring experiences in creating ecological works that involve hands on research and site specific performances. Climbing 100 foot dunes, dodging scud mist while nesting, and squinting against the blaring sun and course sand was all part of the creative process for Winds of Sand (1993). She may ask her dancers to accompany her for a summer of "squinting on rocks" in the Utah desert—dancing in and on rock crevices and balancing precariously on the edges of cliffs, as she did in developing "Utah * Spirit Place * Spirit Place * Takumikivart" (which premiered in the Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors Festival, New York, August 20, 1996).

Large scale works such as these often take years of intensive research. Over an eight year period, Withers gathered inspiration from rock art and the exquisite landscape and people of her home state, Utah for "Takumikivart." The extremely complex work was an interplay of video, slide projections, traditional Native American music, moving props and structures, earth and spirit images, and highly complex choreography. The work has been described as a synthesis of the ancient and future. The choreography itself exists as a dichotomy of the two with both primal gestures and highly complex movement patterns. Like "Seeing Jazz," the

them. "Takumikivart" included a American Indian composer, Brent Michae Davis, a Korean saxophonist, a Hopi poet, Cherokee singer, an installation sculptor, assorted video-graphers, filmmaker, designers—and, of course, there was the dancing.

Whether a solo performance or the choreography of a large scale production Withers moves her audience toward a global vision. Like her environmental works, which reflect her concern for ecology, the themes of her work seek out universal ally, attending her vision across the globe.

"The evolution of art is a process of where you are part of a culture and... the fact that your life continues and that you make art is probably what is the most profound interaction with the community and the race and the earth is how do you continue? The how you continue and how you make art then becomes an immediate reflection of your own perceptions, your own experiences, your own interaction... perhaps the how you continue is the profound that about art, not whether, but how reveals the artistic process," she says.

Withers brings her interaction with the international community home to DC because she learns from the local public as well. Maida Withers is a local artist with global vision. At 61, dance has become a way of living and being for Withers. She suggests that in her giving as a dancer, she is compensated. "It's not a life without fear it's not a life without fatigue, it's not a life without failure (or) sorrow. On the other hand it's life giving."

"Maida Withers and Interactions" will perform on May 1 and 2, 8:00pm in the Marvin Center Theater at The George Washington University, 800 21st Street, NW, located near the Foggy Bottom Metro station. The work will feature choreography by Maida Withers, the Photo-