

Maida Nature

Several years ago in New Mexico, choreographer Maida Withers was developing a new "eco-active" dance by exploring the sand dunes near the Mexican border. But to her dismay, she found that her access to the dunes was limited: Each morning, she was not permitted to enter the area

ARTI FACTS

until 9:30 a.m. because the U.S. military was testing missiles that were later used against Iraq. Withers' sandy endeavors may not have helped Kuwait, but she hopes they will help the environment. "The work I'm doing at these sites in a way is a statement of preservation—it's a commitment to the beauty of these wilderness sites."

A George Washington University dance professor since 1965, Withers, now 54, came to the ecology cause accidentally. Frustrated with what she saw as limitations in her own work and the constraints of "the system," she left D.C. in 1987. "I was seeking some kind of connection to myself, clarification to myself, so that I was feeling good about what I was doing." She ended up in southeast Utah—the land of her birth. That trip changed her life and her work.

During the last three decades, Withers' dances have focused on everything from improvisation (she attended improv-innovator Anna Halprin's first Marin County summer workshop in 1955), family (she has four sons and once almost gave up dancing for full-time mothering), and feminism (1987's *Obsession* explored America's preoccupation with sex). Now, her work is derived from the natural world. The titles of her pieces have shifted from the descriptive—*Dance and Sound Event*, *An Evening of Poetry and Dance*, and *Families Are Forever*—to the ecological: Her latest creations are *Skyload* and *Rolling Thunder*, both of which premiere this weekend at Arlington's Thomas Jefferson Theater.

In order to choreograph her recent works, Withers spent days or weeks at a "landsite"—a cave, a rock, sand dunes. "I've developed an understanding of a landsite process where I go to a landsite and I work with the people who live there," she explains.

"Especially I'm interested in the indigenous people that live there and the history and mythology of that earth." Thus, Withers lives and sleeps outdoors, waking at sunrise in her chosen area of study (she's choreographed in New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah). That way, she explains, "the earth is the inspiration; it is also the process, it is also the subject." At New Mexico's sand dunes, she dressed as an ancient figure, with only a stick holding her robe together, and explored the way sand moved under her feet as she walked. In a video of that experiment (she was accompanied by videographer Belle Cluff), the be-robed Withers resembles an ancient Greek oracle as she roams, her loose, white shoulder-length hair flying in the wind.

Back in a dance studio on G Street, Withers describes how the sand-walk video has developed into *Skyload*, in which dancers manipulate large pieces of material so that the cloth sinks and gradually recovers—the stage version of the sand under Withers' weight. She explains that the camera is a project participant, the first collaborator on each of her efforts, thus the video is the art form most closely connected to the actual landsite.

Usually, the link between the dance and the landsite is very strong, she says, but sometimes it's harder to tell: "The earth may not be recognizable as the subject because the subjects that emerge from those experiences are not always about the land."

Not surprisingly, Withers admits that occasionally she has had difficulty conveying her intentions to her dancers. For the past four years, she worked only with dancers who sought her out—dancers who, though not technically trained, were committed to using dance as a defender of nature. Withers describes the works that resulted from those collaborations as "fairly crude and beautiful because it seemed to be appropriate for the sort of crudeness of the works and the sites and the process and so forth."

But for this year's concert in Brazil, Withers has set pieces on dancers whose training may



WASHINGTON
CityPaper

Earthworks:
Withers and
her Dance
Construction
Company
build
environmental
dances.

eclipse their commitment to nature. Her nine-member Maida Withers Dance Construction Company has never been to Withers' landsites, and so, she says, she had to guide her dancers from their "point of naiveté" to an understanding of her work.

With her conversations about "the spirit of the earth," "our survival and the survival of other species," and "our connection to the land," Withers sometimes sounds like a novice Greenpeace canvasser. Of course, ecology is in: This May, Withers and her company will travel to Brasilia, where they will participate in an international festival of artists for ecology. Then they go to Rio de Janeiro to perform at Earth Summit, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. (This weekend's performance is a benefit for the company's trip.) And closer to home, in June, the Dance Construction Company will perform in an international celebration of artists for ecology on Sugar Loaf Mountain.

Withers hopes that her dances will encourage others to do work on behalf of the environment. "If I can bring other artists into consciousness and into desire also, whatever it is, whether it's the Potomac River, that we sanctify the Potomac River, we clean it up, we make it better, we make it swimmable, we make it inhabitable," she says.

"Dance can communicate the experience of these wilderness sites in a very available, mainstream way."

— KIM FRIEDMAN