The Washington Post
Sunday, October 18, 1981
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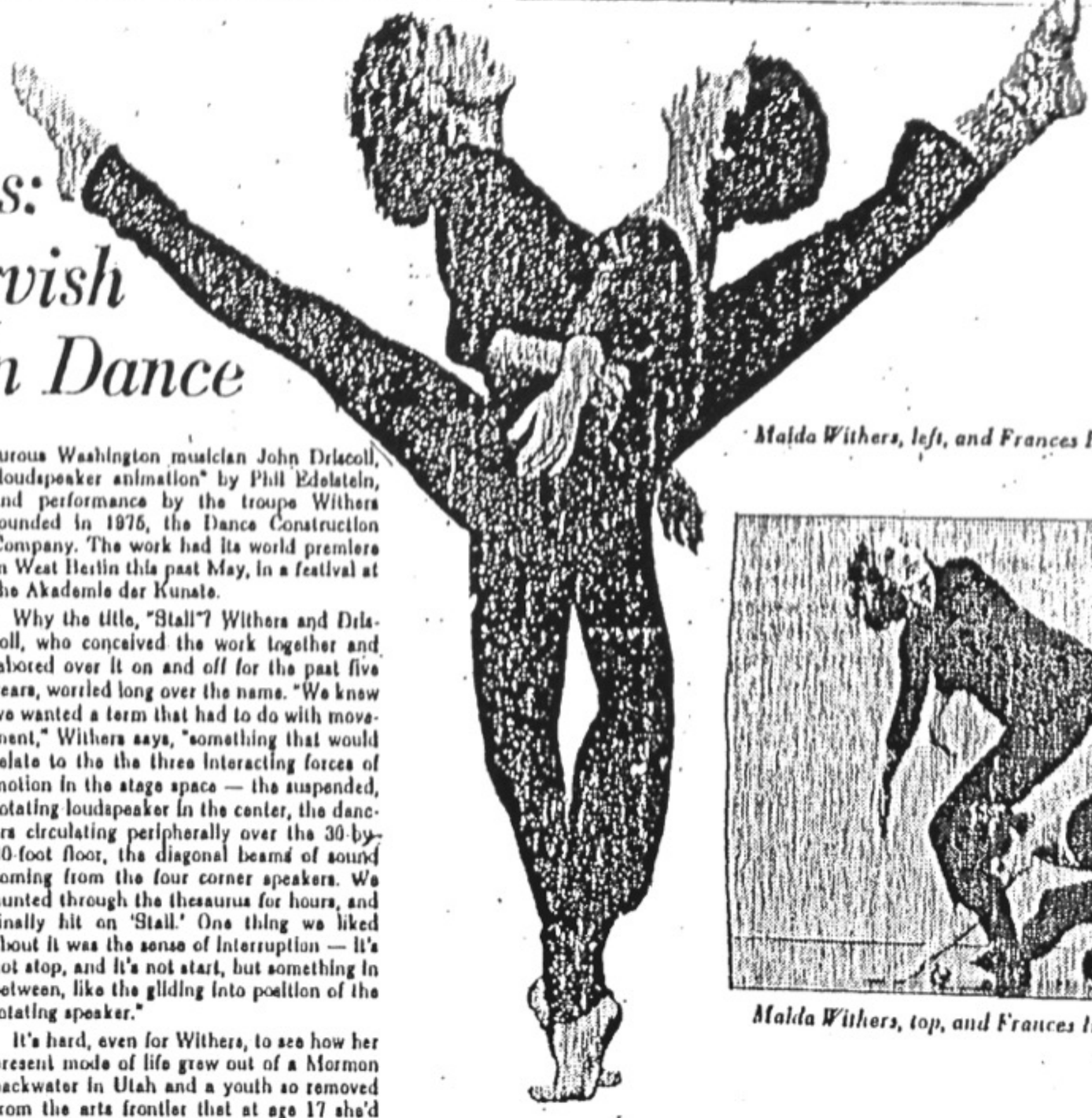
Maida Withers: Diviner & Dervish Of Washington Dance



Maida Withers, left, and Frances Babb; by Dennis Deloria

By Alan M. Kriegsman

Picture the Washington dance scene without Maida Withers — how much duller, drier and shorter on surprise the last decade would have been. It was Withers who took the lead in shaking us up, startling us with new ideas and new methods, bullying us into questioning every assumption or received notion. It was Withers, very largely, who brought us into contact with the artistic turmoil of the late '60s and '70s, both by importations from the outside and by example in her own work. Then, as today, she was our prime evangelist of the novel and strange byways of dance, a tireless advocate of causes, esthetic and otherwise, and a human juggernaut in the force of her wit, stamina and intelligence.

Now this powerhouse of a woman — age 44, mother of four, tall and rangy with the face of a wagonmistress, an incredible shock of charcoal-ash hair and limbs as long as her body, choreographer, company director, impresario, prophetess, teacher — is ascending to a new plateau of recognition. Tuesday evening at the Pension Building her latest work, "Stall," will receive its American premiere as part of the "9th Street Crossings" festival, making Withers the only Washington dance artist to be so honored. "Stall," typically for Withers, is a collaborative endeavor, involving Withers herself both as choreographer and dancer, "sound sculpture" by the adventurous Washington musician John Driscoll, "loudspeaker animation" by Phil Edelstein, and performance by the troupe Withers founded in 1975, the Dance Construction Company. The work had its world premiere in West Berlin this past May, in a festival at the Akademie der Kunste.

Why the title, "Stall"? Withers and Driscoll, who conceived the work together and labored over it on and off for the past five years, worried long over the name. "We knew we wanted a term that had to do with movement," Withers says, "something that would relate to the the three interacting forces of motion in the stage space — the suspended, rotating loudspeaker in the center, the dancers circulating peripherally over the 30-by-30-foot floor, the diagonal beams of sound coming from the four corner speakers. We hunted through the thesaurus for hours, and finally hit on 'Stall.' One thing we liked about it was the sense of interruption — it's not stop, and it's not start, but something in between, like the gliding into position of the rotating speaker."

It's hard, even for Withers, to see how her present mode of life grew out of a Mormon backwater in Utah and a youth so removed from the arts frontier that at age 17 she'd still never seen any professional dance. "The first professional performance of any kind I saw was Harry Belafonte, in Salt Lake City," she recalls.

Malda Withers, top, and Frances Babb; by Dennis Deloria

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Still, she was a free spirit and a cutup almost from the cradle. At 10, she used to do "moon dances" in the street with a friend. In the prim, strait-laced atmosphere of Kanab, Utah, where she was born, and Salem, where she grew up ("It was a town with two stores and a service station"), she would go to church, pretend to fall asleep, and snore out loud. There were strong individualistic streaks in her family. Her parents ran a lodge where guests were entertained with homemade operettas. Her mother, a tiny woman from a family of athletes, was a singer, taught voice and conducted choirs (something Withers still does). Her dad, tall and gaunt, "always wanted to be his own person, living out his fantasy someplace." There was a tradition of theological radicalism on both sides, and a love of ideas. "No one watchdogged me as a child," Withers says, "I did just what I wanted — bliss!"

As a kid, too, she was wild about tap-dancing. "It was my forte. I was fast and limber and started making up my own material, improvised performances. I was good at sports, too, tennis, basketball, running — on Sadie Hawkins Day I'd catch my own date, and then catch all the others' dates. But I preferred the spontaneity of dancing to athletics." A teacher at Brigham Young University, Gerri Glover — "a five-foot ball of fire" — channeled Withers into musical comedy productions, and had her doing assistant teaching by her sophomore year.

In the summers at BYU, she had her first real contact with the gurus of modern dance, taking courses and workshops in other parts of the country with the likes of Erick Hawkins, Hanya Holm and Merce Cunningham. One of these early encounters, with Anna Halprin in San Francisco, was particularly catalytic for her. "I remember Halprin with her uncombed hair and no bra — I mean, this was the '50s and this was pretty flaming stuff for a conservative Mormon from a small town. Where I came from, women got married at 19, had eight children and went to college to learn to be good mothers. But I saw that Halprin was on the hunt for something deep, she saw dance as a humanistic search. I also saw people that were as crazy as I was, and it was very reinforcing."

At Connecticut College one of these summers, she met Louis Horst, Martha Graham's musical mentor-collaborator and the oracle for a whole generation of dancers. "He was a real ogre, you know, used to make people cry in his classes and all that. But I always found him amusing. I choreographed a western brawl scene to one of his 'pre-classic' minuets and we became good friends." After finishing at BYU, she taught for a year at Ricks College in Idaho, where she met her husband-to-be, returning to the University of Utah for a masters in dance and a stint of performing with the Ririe-Woodbury Company. But she dreamed of escaping the Utah environs — "I always knew if I was going to be the person I thought I was, I'd have to leave — I felt a void of ideas."

She got a job teaching at Purdue for three years, and then was offered a post at Howard University in Washington. "I can't believe this actually happened," she says, "but I arrived at Howard without knowing it was a black school. I was incredibly naive, growing up in Utah. Though I had an adopted sister from India, through my teens I'd never met a black person. The Howard experience was fantastic; it was living in Washington and being at Howard that was the beginning of my political consciousness, and my conscience about people. John Kennedy was killed the year I came, and I marched with all the blacks down Pennsylvania Avenue."

The next year saw the start of her long association with George Washington University, where she has been one of the chief architects of the dance program. At first she was a "temporary" replacement, and after a year, she'd just about decided to forgo a career and settle down to motherhood, when she was called in by the department head. "We greeted each other and asked who should go first. I said, You go ahead.' She offered me tenure, without even my asking, and of course I was staggered — that changed everything. I never told her afterwards what I'd come to say to her." At GW, Withers threw herself into choreography and dancing in a big way. With a couple of other Washingtonians, she started the Contemporary Dance Company. At the university, she began to invite a stream of guest artists, to bring the cutting edge of dance esthetics closer into range — the list has included people like Yvonne Rainer, Kei Takei, Meredith Monk, Rudy Perez, Anna Halprin, Beverly Brown and Annabelle Gamson.

In 1975 came the formation of the Dance Construction Company, and with it a flow of innovative Withers creations, many of them in conjunction with musicians and artists like Rockne Krebs, John Bailey, Ron Kuivila and John Driscoll, ranging from meticulously structured abstractions to improvisatory thematic pieces on a variety of social and esthetic issues. Dance enthusiasts may particularly remember "White Mansions" (1975), a Fellinesque fantasy first danced on the slopes of Holy Rood Cemetery; "Time Dance" (1976), an abstraction based on permuted pulsation, with readings from Gertrude Stein and Dick Higgins; "Sunday Maneuvers" (1977), an "environmental" piece for 20 dancers and 15 musicians performed on Theodore Roosevelt Island; and "Woman See," a semiautobiographical feminist opus involving dance, music, narrative, slides and film, premiered early this year.

In 1971, after she had the most recent of her children (who turned out to be twins), Withers conducted a crucial internal dialogue with herself. "I remember thinking out loud, when the twins came — and I wasn't ever pregnant by accident, I wanted my children — that if I'm ever going to do this dance thing, I've got to do it now. I realized that dance was who I was." Nowadays she says: "I've made up my mind I will dance as long as it brings me joy, and as long as I can avoid taking myself so seriously that I can't laugh at what I'm doing — at what it is, and what it isn't."