

Ms. Maida Withers' devotion to modern dance

By Xu Ling

In the rehearsal hall of Guangdong Modern Dance Company, I met 57-year-old Ms. Maida Withers from the United States. With her golden hair, the graceful outline of her face, her big-boned frame and her forceful and brilliant dancing posture, she looked much younger than her age.

Ms. Withers is the artistic director and founder of Maida Withers' Dance Construction Company (1974) in Washington. She is recognized for the beauty and innovation of her choreography for stage, sites and video. She is also a professor in the Department of Theater and Dance, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C., where she teaches Native Dance, Movement Analysis, and Performance Art. She has created and developed a visual and performing art system of stage and video, which is characterized by the process of experimentation, innovation and collaboration. Nature is the source and theme of Maida's works. Combining the video sights with the nature sights, with local people, local history and legends as the background, she has performed a series of dances at some specific outdoor sites.

Ms. Withers said she was born to dance. God gave her a perfect figure to be a dancer. When she was a child, she lived in a small town in Indiana, the west part of the United States. The vast desert there gave her a character of being broad-minded, straightforward and creative. And modern dance can so satisfy her.

Though Maida had some practice on the popular tap dance, jazz dance and ballet of that time when she was a child, she had never tried modern dance until a modern dance college teacher found her when she was a high school student. It was by then she found her life-time career.

For her career, Maida travelled from the west to Washington. The modern technology in the city gave her lots of inspirations. She creatively brought the new technology into her works and created a laser dance which expresses the concern with our planet by using radiation rays and a lot of dancers. The dancers wore glasses and special clothes in prevention of the radiation rays. For this performance, U.S. Environmental Administration specially checked in advance the radiation degree to see if it would exceed the standard. Maida has been trying new ideas over 25 years now.

Trying new things is a part of American curiosity, she told the reporter, the other examples are hollywood films like " E. T." and " Jurassic Park " .

30 years city life in Washington bored her. She felt she could no longer find inspirations and had gradually lost her interest in dancing. she went back to her hometown, intended to live an easy life. However, Looking at the desert, she found her inspirations again. She had her improvisation dance at the American Missile Base, having a piece of sandy-colored cloth draped over her shoulder, indicating that man dropped from a naive world to the desert and began his arduous journey of life. She took video of her own improvisation, brought the nature indoor and then brought it into the city. On the stage, she had the video projected to the screen and she danced to it. She had a dialogue to herself in the world of sand. She was expressing her love to the earth as well as her will of fighting against it.

In Maida's language of dance, we can also find her love to the Indians. Indians believe that they can communicate with God by eagles. In one of her dances, Maida fully expresses the eagles' character of being brave and quick with her every movement. Maida is White. But when she was young, she lived very closely to the Chinese and the Indians who belong to the yellow race. She has a special love towards China. She heard about Guangdong Dance Company, then she sent her personal information to the U.S. Consulate (Guangzhou) asking for help in getting in touch with the company. She had a 6-day teaching in the Company. She said it was one of the greatest moments in her life. She enjoyed being with a group so energetic and with high potential. She would do her best to help promoting the modern dance exchanges between China and the United States.

(translated by Amy Lan, June 9, 1994)