

DANCE / Jean Battey Lewis

3 marvelous women who outdo themselves with 3 marvelous styles

Of all the gifts this spring has brought to the Washington dance scene, it is the performances of three women that stand out — for their warmth, their originality and their willingness to take risks. Nothing else, these three — Liz Lerman, Maida Withers and Kristin O'Shea — are trenchant exponents of the strong role of the dancer, particularly in dance. But there's more: These women are serious, focused artists who are focused on the wellsprings of dance. In their work, it was fascinating to see the individual ways in which they shaped that focus. Liz Lerman brings both passion and considerable wit to her reflections about our soci-

ety and where we're heading. At Lisner Auditorium early this month, she unveiled "Benchmarks," another chapter in her projected full-evening dance-theater work. Her flourishing professional company of dancers both young and old is an important part of her statement.

Miss Withers, who showed a

work in progress at George Washington University's Marvin Center in late April, has gone to the starkly beautiful landscape of the Southwestern United States for inspiration and has constructed a multimedia work with dozens of artistic collaborators.

Both Miss Lerman and Miss Withers have been active locally

for three decades. But Miss O'Shea is a relative newcomer to Washington. Having worked extensively in Europe and come here from Texas, Miss O'Shea has created two solos, based on ancient cave paintings, that offer poetic interpretations of ancient wonders and myths. She presented them at Glen Echo Park in February and at Mount Vernon College in March.

Miss Lerman's vision of dance is all-encompassing and it has made a national impact. Miss Lerman's work accurately reflects her: large-spirited, passionate, involved in community, witty, and with a sure instinct for the telling theatrical gesture.

The theatricality of this spring's concert was striking. Miss Lerman's dances are often about her social concerns and she is earnest about them. She has often leavened them with her particular brand of deadpan humor but in one section of "Benchmarks," about homophobia in the World War II era, she has created a smash hit work that is alternately rollicking and touching.

Three years ago, a grant enabled Miss Lerman to hire new, highly trained dancers. Those three years of working together, in the group's tightly knit style of collaboration, are yielding striking results. Her unique group of dancers young and old, spanning six decades, are outdoing themselves. I have never seen any of them dance better, more exuberantly or with so much projection as they did this spring.

Miss Withers has gone for inspiration to the land where she was born, the starkly beautiful rocks and mesas of Utah. Since 1987, she has made 10 trips to that region, documenting her work there on video and film.

Out of this sustained effort has emerged an ambitious multimedia project, called "Tukuhnikivat." Miss Withers, artistic director of Dance Construction Company, has collaborated with many artists — including an American Indian composer, a Korean saxophonist, a Hopi poet, a Cherokee singer, an installation sculptor, and assorted videographers, filmmakers and designers.

The work is scheduled to have its premiere on the outdoor Damrosch Stage at Lincoln Center in New York City on Aug. 30. Miss Withers showed it as a work in progress at GWU, where she is a professor of dance.

The artists she has assembled have been drawn to the power of the landscape Miss Withers is evoking. Fourteen of them are listed as collaborators and their contributions are of uneven quality.

Miss Withers has been best served by her set designer, Thomas Flocchi, who has built large, 8-foot-high movable structures resembling some of the craggy shapes of the Southwest. They also serve as projection screens for shots of that landscape. In the work's most riveting moment, these shapes are lit from behind, become luminous, and reveal figures moving in archetypal poses.

She has been least well served by the costume designs of Kellie Owens, whose work is overly intrusive and glitzy. Miss Owens has created one design that stands out for its stark simplicity — a man with a thick white mask over his eyes carrying a stick with white streamers. It recalled the beautiful sparseness of Erick Hawkins' costume designs and made one long for more of that quality — more harmony with the other elements.

It is too soon to assess the work's overall impact — the performance this spring took place early on in the process of developing it — but the very number and range of the contributors to this large-scale theatrical work calls for a strong hand to lead the viewer through it.

Miss O'Shea's solos are beautifully constructed, shaped with formal beauty and a sensitive use of light and shade, simplicity and complexity. Most important, she has an artist's telling eye, which sees deeply — both the outer shapes of things and their inner essence.

Her solo "Site Visit," a reflection of cave paintings of woman as earth goddess, was a revelation. In its power and simplicity, it had the mute eloquence of Cycladic art or of Martha Graham's "Lamentation." Strong words, but Miss O'Shea's work pierces the heart.

Her other solo, "Animal Prayer," was so original and insightful in its imagery it showed us — it didn't tell us — why so many people around the globe have a mystic identification with animals.

These are three of the women who are making the Washington dance scene such a rich mosaic.



From above clockwise: Liz Lerman in "Flying in the Middle"; Kristin O'Shea inspired by cave paintings; Maida Withers in "In Winds of Sand."

Above: Maida Withers in "Tukuhnikivat," which draws on the landscape of the American Southwest for inspiration. Below: Liz Lerman, Kimberli Boyd and Judith Jourdin of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange.