

In Her Dances, Video and Sound Win Their Equality

By JENNIFER DUNNING

DANCE is a low-tech art, largely a matter of human bodies and the memory. It is only now awakening fully to the possibilities of new technology as a choreographic tool.

Enter Cathy Weis, a blithely imaginative creator of funky video-enhanced dance who will present two pieces and a preshow divertimento at Dance Theater Workshop, opening on Thursday for a seven-performance run. Ms. Weis has resolved these differences by embracing them. Movement and video — and sound — are equal partners in her work.

"My stuff is very low-tech," Ms. Weis said, her slight drawl and delight in madcap storytelling betraying her Southern origins. "All I ever use is cameras, a mixer and a projector. I just spend hours and hours and hours in the studio, finding stuff that I like. And making mistakes, and then stopping and looking at that mistake and going: 'What is it about this? It's really interesting. What is it?' I kind of dissect it. And there's the kernel of the next idea. All the equipment is low-tech and simple."

Ms. Weis's 1993 "String of Lies," her first program in New York City, had all the messy vitality and visual imagination of Robert Wilson's earliest work. For one video element, she hung a dancer upside down, videotaped her with a camera turned upside down, then projected the image right side up

Cathy Weis, wielding an innovative imagination, incorporates technology of all kinds into her work.

for a haunting portrait of a woman who, hair standing on end, appears to be whipped by a hurricane.

"Way back then, she was taking complex video innovations and turning them on their ear, in a way no one else did," said Mark Russell, who directs P.S. 122 and presented "String of Lies" there. "She's the one who decided, for no reason, to stick a TV inside a tire and roll it across the stage. That surprise — that child's delight in media — and being able to get past the gears to the root of technology and making it theatrical, that's what she's a genius at."

In Ms. Weis's new "Electric Haiku," a series of seven vignettes that will be presented at the workshop, an animated gorilla

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Photographs by Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

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dances with a live 12-year-old girl, parts of a man's body fly off as a woman disrobes, and a killer plane attacks a dancer in an allusion to the film "North by Northwest." It is all achieved with Ms. Weis's usual small store of equipment, only this time there are two cameras and two projectors, along with a high scaffolding and several of the carts that figure in most of Ms. Weis's pieces.

Then and now, to see Ms. Weis's work is to peer into the stage equivalent of a jumbled curio cabinet full of odd but lovingly chosen objects. Laughing, she said her father asks her after each new show, "What the heck was that about?"

Ms. Weis has come a long way from her days as a teenage soloist with the Louisville Ballet in Kentucky, where she grew up. First came the shock of Bennington College in the late 1960's. "I thought I was pretty cool," Ms. Weis recalled. "I was a ballet girl. I had a little bun. I remember this girl with flaming red hair, very buxom and tough. She got up at a poetry class and she went, 'I feel a sunrise between my thighs.' Who knew? I think I went into my room and didn't come out for two months."

It was at Bennington that she met the dancer Lisa Nelson, who eventually got Ms. Weis interested in video. In the 1980's, dancers began to experiment with film and video, then prohibitively expensive. Ms. Nelson was one of them, and she and Ms. Weis collaborated on a piece that will be performed at the workshop. Called "An Abondanza in the Air," the duet also features two battered monitors and was created through annual work sessions over 12 years. It became a kind of abstracted diary of their lives and thoughts about their work.

Ms. Weis had already turned away from dancing. "I didn't know what that was about," she said of her decision. "About the dancing? My love life? My mother, who was sick with M.S. and was dying?"

After a brief but successful career making three-dimensional stained glass objects in California, Ms. Weis came back east. She missed the fuller process of making dances and she had been experiencing strange falls that made it difficult for her to perform. Ms. Weis got a camera and began to videotape dance performances.

By the late 1980's she was collaborating memorably with experimentalist choreographers in New York, providing haunting video imagery that was an intrinsic part of their pieces. "I see now that it was clever of me," Ms. Weis said. "It was a way of my body letting me get back in dance without me noticing."

Ms. Weis began to make her own mixed-media pieces in 1995. Her multiple sclerosis had just been diagnosed; it manifests itself today in almost unnoticeable stumbles and in a brace she sometimes wears when performing. Her marriage fell apart. "I was coming out of this big black hole," she said. "My choices were clear. When I started

doing the first one I thought, 'I don't know how to do this, but I'd better do it.' Because it was like coming out of this crisis and realizing a lot of truths about time and energy and mortality and all that kind of stuff. I said: 'O.K., I'm taking responsibility here. I'm going to go for it.'"

She worked for many years with a core of five downtown dance experimentalists, including Scott Heron and Ishmael Houston-Jones. Mr. Heron, whose imagination is as wild as Ms. Weis's, is a lead performer in "Electric Haiku."

Ms. Weis began the piece after a frustrating misadventure with Internet pieces involving long-distance hook-ups with dancers in Czechoslovakia and Macedonia. (She remains fascinated with that relatively new technology, which she concedes is still in its infancy in terms of dance possibilities.) The main problem was that too often she had to rely on others to help put the technologically complex work together.

"I was always waiting for something," Ms. Weis said, adding that she is not engaged by the kind of conceptual work that results from enforced collaborations with too little time in the studio. "The technology is your tool," she said. "That's mixing your paint. That's where you get your ideas. If you don't do it yourself, then someone else is doing it in your words. It never is as interesting."

In contrast, Ms. Weis envisioned "Electric Haiku" as a necklace of little jewels that she could fashion on her own. She talked at length of the dancers as if they, too, were gems, curios collected and matched with haphazard grace. She found Ksenia Vidyaykina doing a postmodernist strip-tease at a Brooklyn performance space. Zane Frazer, a 12-year-old, was in Ms. Weis's last show and begged to be in another.

Ms. Weis met Parnell Klug, a nondancer who completes the cast, when he attended a performance of hers at Colorado College, where he was a philosophy major. "Parnell ends up in New York," she said. "He calls me and we talk. He wants to be an actor, but he got a job making sets. I said: 'Oh, man, you should come help me. I need all these little things made.' He said, 'O.K., sure.' And then I started looking at him. He looked like Buddy Holly: big black glasses, tall and skinny. I thought he'd look really good with Zaney."

"I said, 'Parnell, I got an idea.' He said: 'Sure, I'd love to. I've never been in a dance show before.' I said: 'Well, let's try it. What the heck. We can find something that you like doing.'"

A conversation with Mr. Heron comes to mind. "Like I was saying to Scotty this one time: 'We're going to make something, now. How do we make it? This is what we got. So we do. You always can.'" □

Cathy Weis

Dance Theater Workshop,
219 West 19th Street, Chelsea. Thursday
through next Sunday and Nov. 29-Dec. 1.



Cathy Weis rehearsing "Electric Haiku" at a Manhattan studio recently. "My stuff is very low-tech," she says. "All I ever use is cameras, a mixer and a projector."