

DANCE

IN THE SPOTLIGHT
Choreographer Cathy
Weis shows off her
silhouette.



Preview

Poetry in motion

Cathy Weis's new *Electric Haiku* illuminates the DTW stage **By Gia Kourlas**

Cathy Weis is one of the dance world's most eccentric characters. Armed with a vivid imagination and a long, dark mane of perpetually teased hair, she derives beauty and humor from life's oddities. As one of the first dance makers to successfully introduce video into her work in the early '90s, Weis embraces technology—not as a slick way to cloak weak choreographic ideas, but as a means with which to enhance her quirky movement.

"I think of it as a tool for looking at what you can do with your imagination," she says. And simply stated, Weis's formula results in unaffected magic. In her newest dance, *Electric Haiku*, which will be performed at Dance Theater Workshop beginning Thursday 21, she incorporates sound design by Steve Hamilton, animation by Phil Marden and interactive media design by Ruben Puenteudera.

The dance comprises eight "haikus"—solos for Scott Heron, Ksenia Vidyaykina, Zane Frazer and Parnell Klug. Ranging from one-and-a-half to eight minutes, each haiku portrays a different fantasy. The initial scene is a play on Pandora's box; Frazer, who is

just 11, opens a laptop, from which a red bee escapes.

Weis, who is reluctant to ruin her many perceptual surprises, regards *Electric Haiku* as a strange movie being made right in front of the audience. "It shifts back and forth between what you're looking at and what you're hearing—a sound might make you see something that's not actually there," she says. "Each haiku gets a little bigger, a little bolder. I've noticed that as I get older, my vignettes become more poignant because I'm more aware that I don't have forever and that every decision cuts out other decisions. The same thing happens with these haikus. It's like there's an outside force—you're going along, something happens, and it changes everything."

A native of Kentucky, where she was a soloist with the Louisville Ballet, Weis moved to New York in 1984 after studying modern dance at Bennington College, designing stained glass in Northern California and touring with a bluegrass band in Canada. A dance injury prompted her to work as a videographer for choreographers including Bill T. Jones, Steve Paxton and Susan Rethorst, but in 1989, she fell, as she

puts it, into "a black hole." The nagging weakness in her right side was diagnosed as multiple sclerosis.

She attributes the other work on the DTW program, *An Abondanza in the Air*—a 1990 duet with her oldest friend, Lisa Nelson, a choreographer, videographer and improviser—as part of the cathartic emergence from that hole. Although they began working on *Abondanza* before she was diagnosed, the pair has continued to tinker with it over the past decade.

In the 30-minute piece, Weis and Nelson hold vintage battery-operated television sets that screen a variety of images, including footage of themselves. The duet begins on a darkened stage; as the collaborators, who are not visible, carry the monitors, it seems as if the televisions are darting about and floating in the air of their own accord. "We say that we paint reality from the darkness and then the lights come on, and dreams happen in the light," Weis says. "We think of it as painting images in space."

Though they last performed *Abondanza* in 1992, they have spent three weeks each year revising it. "We've taken it apart, put it together and analyzed every second a million ways," Weis says. "The whole project has been a diary of our relationship. We ended up looking at all our versions and kind of going back to the original one. It was the best."

One component of the piece does trouble Weis. "The televisions are heavy," she says. "I told my physical therapist, 'Look, I'm doing this piece with this heavy thing, and I'm not sure if I'm holding it right.' I brought it over, and she said, 'I will have nothing to do with this! I refuse to get involved; it's insane!' I told Lisa, and she said, 'Oh, come on! Don't be a wimp—you can do it.'"

For Weis, the DTW engagement marks a change in her choreographic process, but that has less to do with movement and technology than her decision to enforce strict rules with her collaborators. "I made very clear deadlines, and if they weren't met, I would cut it," she says. "I've done that with a few really good ideas, but I'll use them later. Ideas are a dime a dozen in a way—it's how you develop and treat them that counts. This has been a very successful show no matter what happens. I understand what I need to do to not fall apart and get too fatigued. It's been a big step forward."

Cathy Weis performs at DTW Thursday 21 through December 1.

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