

Words get in Monk's way

> BY ALEXANDER VARTY

Good news for Meredith Monk: as I write this, the October monsoons have given way to clearer skies, and she may not need to use the rain gear I suggested she bring during a recent telephone chat. The weather was on the innovative singer and composer's mind when I reached her at her New York City loft, and not just current conditions in the vicinity of the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts, where she'll perform with her ensemble on Saturday (November 12). Global warming is one of her pressing concerns, especially in light of the three-year drought that has parched the southwestern United States, where she lives part-time.

"It's been terrible," she says, seemingly as eager to talk about this as her work. "In New Mexico there's been a devastating beetle infestation, because the trees can't stay strong enough if they don't have water. I think they lost about 75 percent of the piñon trees in the Santa Fe area." And with that, she catches herself, remembering that there's an interview to be done. "Oy, oy, oy!" she exclaims. "That's a good way to start off our conversation! But music makes everything better. All the more reason to keep on doing it, you know."

Monk has been making music on a professional level for 40 years. In fact, on the day we talk she's rehearsing for a massive retrospective concert at the World Financial Centre's Zankel Hall. Björk, John Zorn, the Pacific Mozart Ensemble, DJ Spooky, Terry Riley, and a host of others are all convening to pay tribute to this innovative and underappreciated artist, while she herself is readying a new version of *Dolmen Music*, one of the strongest and strangest works in her canon. It should be a memorable night—and so should her Chan Centre appearance, which is also a survey of a sort. The evening, which is being presented as part of the LIVE Biennial of Performance Art, encompasses solo pieces, an a cappella duet, and two episodic compositions for vocal ensemble, piano, and percussion: 2001's *Mercy* and 1980's *Turtle Dreams*.

"It's really a wonderful concert to sing, and a very nice contrast," she says. "*Mercy* is very moving; it's not exactly what I'd call pastoral, but it has a more metaphysical kind of quality, while *Turtle Dreams* is more urban. It has an edge to it, and it's very, very energetic. So it's a very good way of showing the range of what we do."

Granted, what Monk likes to do is not always immediately apparent. For one thing, the composer—who will also discuss her art at Ironworks on Friday (November 11)—loves to



Though a musician first and foremost, Meredith Monk searches the spaces between art forms for ways to immerse her audience in the moment.

blur the boundaries between different disciplines.

"People always say to me, 'How can you be a musician and a composer, but you do dance and you do film and you do this and you do that?'" she comments. "And I say, 'I think of it as one thing, and each piece is a different balance of those elements depending on what the piece really needs.'"

"Music is still the centre of it for me," she adds. "It's the core of everything. But from time to time these other elements come up in my mind, and I'll make a piece that includes all these different perceptions. Things that fall between the cracks of what we call the different art forms are basically where I've found a lot of my discoveries."

Monk's art is also unrepentantly abstract, to such a degree that she eschews conventional storytelling in favour of ritualized gestures, wordless arias, and polyvocal explorations of sound. She's interested in what she calls "primal, visceral experience", and to that end her long-form pieces are structured so that each audience member can create their own narra-

tive from the visual and verbal cues offered by her group. Words, she says, would only get in the way.

"I hope that my work is immersive for an audience, that they can just drop down into it, and that they can let go of the chatter of the discursive mind for a short period of time," she explains. "What I'm trying for is the kind of direct experience that we can't filter out. In a sense we filter our experience by labelling it; we have a kind of verbal screen that filters out direct experience, and I think that the power of music is that you can get past that to direct experience of the present moment."

This might sound hard to grasp, but in practice Monk's work is subtle, complex, and immensely pleasing to the senses.

"The most important thing to get across is that people should know that they can actually enjoy the concert," she says. "Sometimes seeing people play new music can be like 'Oh, it's going to be this very hushed sense of high art' and all that, but the way to experience *this* music is just to relax. There's nothing fearsome about it at all." ♦

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