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**Tan Swie Hian**

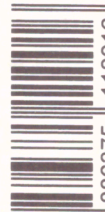
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**instant**


- Singapore Arts Festival 2003 issue: Meredith Monk, H Art Chaos, Jeremy Monteiro, Ballett Nürnberg, Ong Keng Sen, William Yang, Mark Chan and Kumar
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**I had done** my background check on Meredith Monk. She is the undisputed prima diva of extended vocal technique. Her mother was a singer, her grandfather was a singer and her great-grandfather was a singer. Singing was very much a part of her growing up, so what's the big deal?

"Coming from that family compelled me to find my own way of working with voice, with singing." So in 1965, she did.

To the person on the street, singing conjures up the act of belting out a popular song number; a number based on the formula: verse-chorus-verse-chorus. The primary role of this 'song' would be to provide the listener with a flight of fantasy utilising words; a voyeuristic moment that would begin and end in a few minutes. To the diva whose work marked the beginning of what many now refer to as 'extended vocal technique' her voice is a messenger, a harbinger of offerings that is beyond words... not even a picture could paint.

Monk says: "My music comes from my exploration of the notion that the voice is an instrument and a language in itself that can delineate feelings that which we don't have words for." These explorations do not follow the western European tradition at all in terms of harmony or conventions but seek to discover the voice and its myriad of possibilities. "Within the voice there are countless colours and landscapes and ways of producing sound, gender, age," proffers Monk.

Monk is acclaimed as the voice that spawned the vocal-likes of Kate Bush, Laurie Anderson and even Bjork. The phrase "Bjork-like" is favoured by the media in our local pop-art industry as a means of describing a singing style that is capricious, unorthodox, avant-garde and just plain out of the grasp of ordinary folk. Though the term 'extended vocal technique' was invented

following Monk's pursuits, she loathes the idea of "categorising". The need to pigeonhole things is a "very materialistic commodification of everything," she argues.

One of the many techniques that have become part and parcel of Monk, the commodity, is 'throat singing'. She uncovered its glorious overtones while playing the "Jew's Harp". Monk only became aware that this was an indigenous practice in Tuva, when it was pointed out to her at the performance of her *Songs From The Hill* concert at the New York Town Hall in 1976. Another is 'hocketing', a method by which 'players' share a rhythmic and/or melodic line, working together and interlocking; one part resting while the other part(s) has a note or notes. So is the use of phonemes, which she employs to create her world of sound within each song; circular breathing; and ululations, just to name a smidgen of her numerous extended vocal methods.

Members of her vocal ensemble, some of whom come from around the world – Ching Gonzalez is Filipino and Theo Bleckmann, German – have a three-octave range, cleverly disguising multiple personalities within their voices, until the time is right to strip away these layers to reveal the many characters within them.

Does Monk write with a theme in mind? In her 1981 album, *Dolmen Music*, she was interested in crafting a section about different speeds of vibrato.

And finding a name for her music? In *Mercy*, a multimedia theatre-piece which Monk will be bringing to this year's *Singapore Arts Festival*, a section christened *Liquid Air* began life as 'the bubbles' song'; it aptly describes singing into a big soapy, bubble-like membrane.

*Mercy* is Monk's first collaboration with Ann Hamilton, a noted pioneer in site-specific work, and with a visual

MUSIC

# Have Mercy Meredith Monk on making music

BY SHUEH-LI ONG





Meredith Monk;  
scenes from *Mercy*

**"WE HAD TO ARTICULATE IN WORDS OUR IDEAS A LOT EARLIER THAT WE WOULD IF WE WERE JUST WORKING BY OURSELVES."** MEREDITH MONK



holder of the *Brandeis Creative Arts Award*, the 1986 *National Music Theater Award*, 16 *ASCAP Awards* for Musical Composition, the 1992 *Dance Magazine Award*, and who in the mid-60s was the earliest person to do site specific work, giving up her ego was easier said than done.

A scene from

*Mercy* shows Monk and Hamilton sitting, facing each other across a table – "two human beings negotiating... and being able to come to a third thing" – providing an allegoric inkling into what *Mercy* is really all about. They desperately needed to get inside each other's heads.

"We had to articulate in words our ideas a lot earlier that we would if we were just working by ourselves. If I am working on material that is very intuitive, I don't want to verbalise it at the beginning of the process," reveals Monk. "We were talking about words like structure... thinking we were talking about the same thing but I was talking about structure in terms of time, she was talking about structure in terms of space!" This process of give and take became the content for *Mercy*, and this act of negotiation, a microcosm of the idea of *Mercy*.

In terms of musical structure, *Mercy's*

ensemble cast of eight will also feature Katie Geissinger (voice), Allison Shiffin (synthesiser-organ/voice), Ellen Fisher (dancer/actor), John Hollenbeck (percussion), and Bohdan Hilash (clarinet). Forming a 'musical embrace' will be 20 extras from Singapore who will start out as the audience.

*Mercy's* multimedia structure will play on scale. A panoramic kind of show where you will be presented with video projections on a giant screen fed by miniscule videos placed in mouths, or on someone's dress.

Monk who is renowned as much for her pioneering work into dance as with voice, confesses "the movement aspect is... very gestural. People who come from dance training would say it is not even dance. It is very much dealing with dance/movement as a ritual in a more primal sense, not so schooled... virtuosic in a different way."

Monk is hoping the audience will not miss the sophistication of a performance that is technically challenging in both sound and video. Yet she yearns for them to drop the narrator of the mind – "the thing that's saying 'what does this mean?' and 'I don't understand'... a kind of yakking that we do". She wants to send you on a non-malevolent trip "where you are in contact with experience itself".

Tay Tong, Managing Director of TheatreWorks, is one person who has had the good fortune to make contact with this commodity. "As part of the *Flying Circus Project 2000*, she [Monk] gave one presentation to the public. It was packed and the audience loved her! I find Meredith very much on the cutting edge in the performing arts."

Although Ann Hamilton could not clear her schedule to make it to Singapore, the collaboration between Monk and Hamilton will be one not to miss this June. ■

*Mercy is on 14-15 Jun at Victoria Theatre.*

artist. Monk, whose accomplishments have also earned her the title "leading postmodern choreographer", has composed works of operatic proportions and even performed in the presence of the Dalai Lama. Hamilton's ephemeral works, comprising disparate mediums of expression such as textile, sculpture, video and performance, have visited venues as distant as the Musee d' Art Contemporain in Lyon, and the Tate Gallery in London. For Monk and Hamilton, two individuals who are used to being in charge of the different elements of their own work, the conundrum was in figuring out the division of labour.

"It was really starting from an equal conceptual place and, as we went along, figuring out who was going to do what... a lot to do with a renunciation of your usual territory."

With 30 years of interdisciplinary performances to her name, for Monk,

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