



MOVIES

Javier Bardem elevates "Biutiful." 4

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"Dancing Voice/Singing Body" is artful exercise for participants.



ARTIST IN MOTION

Meredith Monk, versatile creator, ends a busy week at Bryn Mawr with a show Sunday. Page 16

Meredith Monk leads a workshop at Bryn Mawr.

SHARON GEKOSKI-KIMMEL



Aigner Picou
(facing camera)
warms up with other dancers in the workshop, open to those on and off campus.



Meredith Monk watches dancers doing her exercises in a "Dancing Voice/Sing"



SHARON GEKOSKI-KIMMEL / Staff Photographer
 "Dancing Body" workshop. At right, she plays the piano and sings with participants.

cover story

ARTS ABOUNDING

By David Patrick Stearns
 INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

Some came expecting a shaman. Instead, they got something more along the lines of a big sister.

Seeming smaller than when on-stage, singer-choreographer-dancer-composer Meredith Monk patiently waited as a week's worth of her activities were spelled out to the 30 or so people who showed up for her Tuesday workshop at Bryn Mawr College. Her ethereal, visionary theater works and films are being celebrated and discussed in this full week of Monk that leads up to her Sunday performance of *Education of a Girlchild* Revisited at Goodhart Hall.

"By the time this is over," she said, "you are going to be so sick of me!"

At age 68, Monk has created a body of hard-to-define works that inhabit an area somewhere between chamber opera and performance art — pieces that use syllables instead of words, giving the impression of sacred messages from an unseen world. At the very least, Monk would seem to be singing in tongues.

"Two years ago, I saw her do a solo piece. The stage was fully in white and she was painted white ... and I felt like she was performing to me. Everybody felt that," said Sarah Konner, 24, freelance dancer who responded to the open invitation to Monk's workshop. "Seeing that actually changed the way I felt about performing arts. It was so special and emotional. I just had to come and be in the same room with her."

The offstage Monk isn't at all re-



Meredith Monk, whose work defies labels, has brought her many talents to Bryn Mawr. Her week comes to a close with a performance Sunday.

mote or obscure. More than ever these days, she hugs strangers and deeply appreciates such comments but shrugs off what might be called "the shaman treatment," if only because pedestals create a static persona.

While her work is fundamentally meditative — she's a devout Buddhist — Monk has an earthy side: At some points during the "Dancing Voice/Singing Body" workshop — which attracted a predominantly female but not necessarily Bryn Mawr crowd — the vocalizing evolved into yapping and wailing. A few departed early, often the ones wearing heavy eyeshadow.

That's bound to happen when Monk is invited into long-established institutions like Bryn Mawr, as she is with increasing frequency. She composes for full-scale orchestras, most recently the St. Louis Symphony. Especially since the 2002 death of her partner, the Dutch choreographer Mieke van Hoek, Monk must keep moving forward.

"When something like that happens to you," she says, "everything is in a different perspective. You do what you really feel is important to give in the time that you've got left. In a funny way, you aren't afraid, in terms of what anybody thinks of you. It's imperative to follow your own path, to give as much as you can and have your work be of benefit to sentient beings. That's my feeling."

In fact, Monk was in the middle of writing *Possible Sky* for Michael Tilson Thomas and his New World Symphony when van Hoek died of a brain tumor. "I remember MTT said, 'Are you really sure you want to do

See **MONK** on W18



SHARON GEKOSKI-KIMMEL / Staff Photographer

Meredith Monk demonstrates movements in a workshop. She is a singer, dancer, composer, choreographer.

Artist's busy week at Bryn Mawr

MONK from W16
this?' And I thought Mieke would want me to go through with it."

The most obvious product of that experience is *Impermanence*, widely considered one of her best pieces. It begins with emotionally neutral piano chords and a voice engaged in hypnotic free association: "Last chance, last dance, last minute, last lap, last laugh, last ditch, last rites, last judgment, last words, last time. ..."

The challenge these days is to write down pieces that have existed for years. Much of Monk's work with her various ensembles is transmitted orally. Despite the encouragement of her publisher, Boosey & Hawkes, she says certain things can't be written down.

"There are so many different ways of expressing the same thing, so you have to figure out what is going to let other people understand these principles. Sometimes you don't see that in the notes on the page. With Kronos Quartet [for which she wrote *Stringsongs* in 2004], the last movement was composed with my voice. I played a tape of me singing the last movement so they could get those kinds of vocal color changes."

Though she is often classified with such downtown-Manhattan minimalists as Philip Glass and Steve Reich, she doesn't care for the Bach-like sense of order in those works. Her world is sim-

pler, more functional. Her mother, a singer, was considered a phenomenon in the world of advertising jingles; she could sightread anything. Monk had operatic training, but while at Sarah Lawrence College in the 1960s gravitated toward folk music.

What a different world that was. "I was lucky to come up in a period with an anything-is-possible mentality. This society is much more conservative, politically, and every way else. Limitations are imposed."

Though she embraces new technology for the sake of creativity, she feels at odds with a world that seems to prefer preserving moments with a camera phone to being fully present for them. "I find that really disconcerting. You're living your life as a secondary experience. But art can cut through that into a direct experience."

Especially when the art is the unadorned human voice, around which most of Monk's work is built. In some ways, the rising popularity of world music has boosted her reception, even if comparisons are inaccurate. "I work from inside out," she says. "Once you let go of the Western European sound ... you're working with your instrument, with yourself. I think of each piece as a world of sound. The question is, what is the voice, or the voices, of

this world. And I never get that from listening to world music."

Thus, her possibly most important commandment on Tuesday: "Work with what's there in your voice, not what you want to be there."

In what was essentially a Monk 101 class, she taught integrated voice and movement, though not as multitasking; with her, they're one and the same. After two hours, members of the group formed a circle and took turns improvising vocal and physical flourishes by singing their names. Some shot them up like skyrocket; others simply stretched out their arms and said their names with a straightforward exclamation point. Monk used her multisyllabic *Meredith* to suggest a feather in the wind.

What did she hope to convey? "A sense of openness so they would be curious enough to find something for themselves. I hope they will make contact with their own truth ... and realize they have a lot of resources."

One critic described Monk's truth as folk music for a civilization that hasn't been invented yet. I go a step further: Her music is from a world that's always been in front of you — if you'd only notice.

The alleged shaman laughs heartily and gives a high five.

Contact music critic David Patrick Stearns at dstearns@phillynews.com