

Meredith Monk's Quarry

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Meredith Monk's strange and beautiful creations are mixtures of music, dance, and theater. Images, both visual and aural, are arranged and paced with masterly theatrical craft to produce works that are strikingly original and hauntingly effective.

One of her finest works--and one of her most accessible--is *Quarry*, an 86-minute theater piece (or opera) that won an Obie award in 1976. The Dance Collection of the New York Public Library decided to make a color record film of the production during its run at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1977. Although the film was made on a very limited budget, using only two cameras, and although the work--staged to take place in a large rectangular space with the audience arranged along the two long sides--was very difficult to photograph, the results of the filming were so successful that Monk has been willing to allow the film to be released as a very acceptable approximation to the live theatrical event.

The work

Quarry is set around the time of World War II and the central figure, played by Monk herself, is a restless child in bed, disturbed by illness and by the harsh, half-understood terrors of the adult world going on around her. Her parents are apparently absent and her chief confidant is a maid, a rather vacant and unconcerned creature who loves to read gossip magazines and listen to the radio. The radio is the chief window to the outside world for the child and the maid is her unwitting, and rather witless, guide.

Quarry explores this child's-eye view of the universe, distorted by illness, skewed by half-comprehension. Beginning with scenes of comfortable domesticity, troubled only by personal illness, the outside horrors of war, of Hitler, of holocaust, begin to impinge on the child's sensibilities. Soon these images--jumbled in her mind, exaggerated, simplified--come to dominate her whole perception. At the end, she is dressed for a journey, dressed to go out into that ominous world, uncertain of its dimensions but helplessly certain of its terrors.

In the first section of the work, called "Lullaby," the child lies ill in bed--the bed is suggested a blanket and pillow arranged on the floor in the middle of the space. She is surrounded by the comfortable and the familiar. There is a rather scatter-brained aunt (some see her as the child's mother) whose husband is away at war; an older couple (the child's grandparents perhaps) who chatter ineffectually about trivia--hers is domestic, his scholarly; an old testament couple, suggesting the child's heritage, who read scrolls and never speak; and the child's playmates who frolic and fight and eat lunch. The maid sweeps and plays games with the child, bicycles glide by, paper-mache clouds, held aloft on poles, float through the space.

Gradually, disturbing elements intrude on this gentle landscape. There is talk of shortages, the child's playmates reappear as be-goggled factory workers, and a sinister man in khaki overalls steals about taking flash pictures of the child's relatives. The behavior of the playmates and the relatives becomes erratic sometimes and for a while white, droning bombers replace the clouds on the poles. The child becomes bewildered and agitated, but is calmed by the grandfather.

The maid turns on the radio and fiddles with the dial. One station has a child's program

about the King and Queen of Abyssinia (the far-off country in which World War II essentially began); then we hear a dictator stirring up a shouting crowd; finally the dial is set at a station playing a gentle lullaby. There is a blackout and the aural images from the radio are jumbled in a brilliant piece of theater: we see the radio singer in a glass booth high above the stage area; she continues to seem to sing the lullaby, but gradually her soothing gestures become those of a raving demagogue. From another isolated stage a man in a business suit, identified as the Dictator (played by Pin Chong), watches approvingly.

The lights come on again and the stage area is swept clear by a "wash"--a slowly moving chorus of some two dozen white-clad singers and dancers. As they begin to traverse the stage space, their movements and their songs are gentle, lulling, pure. But as they reach the end a more agitated gestural and aural counterpoint has been added.

The middle section of the work, called "March," begins as a red carpet is rolled out and five comically grotesque characters space themselves along it, attended by the sardonic maid. These are the "dictators," we are told, and we see them at "work" and at their "evening meal." In various ways they are killed off and over their bodies--as Hitler rose to power over pettier tyrants--the Dictator ascends with his aide (the man with the flash camera) in attendance. The Dictator delivers now a double speech. The first is aural--reverberating gibberish bellowed into a microphone--while the second is purely gestural--alternating stances of threat, placation, contempt, and derangement.

When he finishes, an extraordinary black and white film is inserted (projected on a screen when the work was staged). It contains views of a huge water-filled stone quarry. There are jarring shifts of perspective--human figures come from behind rocks that seem at first to be mere pebbles--and the film concludes by showing white-clad bodies floating lifelessly in the pure water.

Suddenly we are back in the stage space. While the child writhes in her bed and the grandparents sit quietly, the space is filled by a chorus dressed in regimental grey. This sequence is called "Rally" and the performers shout percussively and engage in harsh calisthenic-like actions under the approving, dominating gaze of the Dictator. The Dictator's henchman moves about making chalk X's on the floor in front of the doomed adults.

The mob is finally quelled by a woman who moves through the space commanding quiet and distributing suitcases, reducing the crowd to an exhausted, wretched rabble. The Dictator applauds. Then as he turns his back, the child's grandparents, dressed in hat and coat, rise and as in a trance drop their jewelry and valuables in a heap at their feet. All except the child exit slowly, bearing their suitcases. The henchman enters and scrambles around the space erasing the chalk X's, obliterating all record of the previous scene.

Three women dressed, like the child, in night clothes, enter and lie on the floor. They quiver and shudder, put their hands to their eyes, as if having nightmares. The child goes toward one of them and tries to wake her, unsuccessfully. Blackout.

The final section of *Quarry*, called "Requiem," begins in calm as the clouds drift through the space. The child and maid enter, dressed in hat and coat, ready to go to some unspecified place. They run in bewildered circles around the bed as the radio belches gibberish. Then calm prevails again.

The ending of the work is an astonishing blend and cross-blend of sound and visual image. The child and the maid pace around the bed singing a gentle, mournful chant. The chorus, dressed in street clothes, gradually enters and joins them in their steady procession. The child and maid move to the bed and look through a picture book, as if idling away time, waiting.

The chorus continues its circular procession but its song dies out. The child continues to sing the melody but as she sways fitfully the song gradually becomes distorted into a shattering wail of helpless protest; then, in resignation, it slowly wanders back to the original melody and soon dies away. The lights fade and the theater piece ends in darkness--the only sound being that of the pacing of the chorus which has now become louder, sounding like the ominous march of jackbooted stormtroopers.

Monk refers to *Quarry* as an "opera in three movements" and this designation stresses that it is from a musical base that her concept of theater derives. Music for voice and organ--all of it composed by Monk herself--is used not merely to underscore the drama, but as an integral force--frequently as a motivating one. Her most memorable images--as in the child's final wail or in the "wash" and "rally" sections--are precisely calculated blends of aural and visual images. And, as in the radio singer's gestural tirade over the sound of a soothing lullaby, Monk is also able to contrast the two media with a penetrating sense of theater.

The film

The success of the film in capturing the theatrical experience is astonishing. This must be just about the first time in history that a feature-length motion picture has been shot in one day--with only two cameras. The scope and detail of this sprawling piece of theater are transmitted brilliantly. Indeed in some cases the camera's ability to single out details for precise examination intensifies the theatrical experience. Judicious camera pans in the rally section discover the startling image of the child writhing in bed, for example (a detail some missed in the theater); and closeups of the exhausted participants afterwards emphasizes the pathos of their condition. Equally impressive is how clearly and capably the sound has been recorded in the cavernous Lepercq space of the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Since the film was originally shot to be a simple record of the event, not as a film for theatrical release, there are a few places where other footage might have served better. The "wash" section, for example, is filmed largely from what might be called the end zone while a better perspective would have been the 50-yard line so that the chorus' progression across the viewer's frame of reference could make more impact. And there are a few cases where events happen off camera--the death of the second of the comic dictators, for example. But, overall, these prove to be minor defects.

The *Quarry* film was directed by Amram Nowak as one of a series of record films he has made for the Jerome Robbins Film Archive of the Dance Collection--none of the others, unfortunately, is available for rental. Many extra hours of editing necessary to finish this remarkable film were put in by Bob Rosen and the filming and editing were under the very interested supervision of Meredith Monk. Funding was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and the release of the film was made possible by funds from a National Endowment for the Humanities grant.