

The Moving Pencil Writes

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Meredith Monk (left) and Ann Hamilton: using the archetype of the lullaby

photo: Jack Vartoogian

A pencil wandering across a page is an irresistible analogy for a human life: leaving its irrevocable, wavering mark as it goes, expending itself in an inherently finite process. At the beginning of *Mercy*, by Meredith Monk and Ann Hamilton, recently performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Hamilton held a tiny camera on the point of a charcoal pencil as it roamed across the paper. Only the paper itself had no edge—it was a long, long sheet pulled from offstage, so that actually the paper moved, not the pencil. What we saw onscreen was that pencil point moving endlessly across a vast white expanse. Just watching it made you feel contextualized, lonely, aware of where you were in the thin line of your life on the vast field of humanity, how much charcoal has been used, how much is left. And not only seeing, but hearing, for the pencil was amplified.

That's the kind of creativity I've come to expect from Meredith Monk every time: simple but powerful, and powerful precisely because it is so simple. This is what the mid-century mavens of modernism forgot: that when music became complicated it relinquished its power, because it had become extremely specific, and no longer possessed generalized archetypes to speak to the human condition. And Monk's music is deeply archetypal—partly, but not solely, because it begins with the human voice.

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The endless pencil line was the recurring theme for a series of merciless vignettes that looked at human situations, often through that tiny camera, sometimes concealed in a character's mouth, and always with compassion. Monk's archetype has often been the lullaby, but in *Mercy* it seemed—and seems, since I'm listening to the new ECM CD as I write this—to be the *plaint*, the lamentation, the song of mourning and by extension of comfort. Minor keys predominated, with what were for Monk unusually inconclusive harmonies. People dressed in vaguely old-fashioned European attire threaded past a nurse who examined each and eventually said, "Come in." Words were rare, but one word the singers sang to each other, muting it as though afraid of being too clearly understood, was *help*.

Besides, a lullaby has a built-in end point—the baby falls asleep. A plaint is an open-ended, trailing-away affair, and instead of the verse structure of the lullaby, *Mercy* was propelled by ostinatos, repeated accompaniment figures on piano and synthesizer by Allison Sniffin and on percussion by John Hollenbeck. Meticulously differentiated, every one was a different beat-length: five beats for this song, eight for that one, seven or 10 for another. They made the music go around and around in a circle, an endless but repetitive human parade, just like the parade of human misery in which Monk's enlarged cast of dancers filed across the stage—just like that endless pencil line.

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For all its impressive visual theater—including huge bubbles made by running soap down pairs of wires suspended from the ceiling—*Mercy* was perhaps Monk's most musically ambitious piece since her opera *Atlas*, full of solid chunks of ensemble composition. Her repertoire of sounds was expanded—there were odd, muffled, nonharmonious tones from the synthesizer and considerable noise from Hollenbeck, who was allowed room for chaotic percussion improvisation. Tune in to the CD at certain moments, and Monk wouldn't come to mind. Rhythmic repetitions played off of each other in layers, cycling in different tempos at once. And

Monk's fellow singers—Alexandra Montano, Ching Gonzalez, Lanny Harrison, Ellen Fisher, and Theo Bleckmann, who particularly deserves notice for his versatile characterizations—were also given free rein to develop their own performing styles for the piece, though this isn't as evident on the recording as it was live.

The focus of that camera on people's hands while they were writing, on their mouths while they were singing, on the doctor's (Bleckmann's) face as he examined Monk, kept an enlarged focus on the mundane, painted by the music with a noble poignancy. All this with no plot, no dialogue, no obvious throughline. It's evidence of the level that Monk and Hamilton are working on that until I started writing this column I hadn't figured out why the piece was called *Mercy*. And now it's so obvious.

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