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On Line, Choreographer Pushes Back Boundaries

By DULCIE LEIMBACH
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AS a modern dancer and choreographer, Cathy Weis was one of the first to use video, lugging the bulky video monitors on stage and integrating them into her performances as if they, too, were dancers. Fifteen years later, Ms. Weis is now one of the first in New York's modern-dance hive to create a live interactive and collaborative dance form on the Web.

Interactive dance on the Web? Sounds a bit dubious in this era of slow downloading and broken connections. But Ms. Weis isn't waiting for modem speeds to catch up to her art form. "This is not talking heads," Ms. Weis said. "We're pushing this technology."

Her live Web performance from Bennington College in Vermont last year gave some sense of what Internet dance is about. Three dancers at Bennington performed while Ms. Weis operated the video camera on stage, shooting, for example, a dancer's foot and then sending that image over the Internet to Mischa Bielicky, a collaborator in Prague. Mr. Bielicky, a new-media specialist at the Art Institute there, responded with hand movements through a camera attached to his computer. Ms. Weis put Mr. Bielicky's movements through a video mixer and projected everyone's movements onto a large screen behind the Bennington dancers.

Ms. Weis called it a "chance dance," a description made more apt by the frequent breaks in the connection caused by traffic on the Web. Ms. Weis choreographed the event to "allow for idiosyncrasies," she said, and she added that the dance had been beautiful despite the freezing and fracturing of the image.

A winner of the prestigious Bessie Award in the choreography-creator category, Ms. Weis and her Internet performances are taken seriously. Through on-line work, "I'm trying to use the magic by expanding the boundaries of performance," she said.

She may have also been acknowledging indirectly that as a dancer suffering from a debilitating disease -- she has lived with multiple sclerosis for more than a decade and wears a leg brace during the day -- she needs all the magic she can tap.

The first inklings that something was wrong occurred after she moved to New York. "I was in my late 30's, feeling very tired, and my husband said, 'Everybody in New York feels like that.' " But she "had some bad falls, things I couldn't ignore."

After the diagnosis -- which shocked her despite the fact that her mother had died of the disease when Ms. Weis was in her early 20's -- Ms. Weis felt as though her life was shattered. Her marriage ended as well. Fortunately, as a dancer tough enough to have been a soloist at age 13 for the Louisville Ballet, she had the physical and psychological stamina to bounce back. "It was hard for me to talk about my M.S. for a long time," she said, "but now that I've come out of the closet, I don't stop talking about it."

Her focus on technology over the years has illuminated her view of her illness. For her most recent show, "Lizard Monitors" in April, she and a partner, Scott Heron, performed at Dixon Place in the East Village. As part of the performance, an image of Ms. Weis's head appeared live on a small television screen, which was passed around the audience as Mr. Heron danced on stage and Ms. Weis talked from behind the stage, creating a disembodied

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
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effect.

"The oblique fracturing of the body parts, the disconnectedness to your body is also an extension of what I'm doing on the Internet," she said.

Very few of Ms. Weis's fellow modern dancers have produced work on the Web. The dancer Bill T. Jones choreographed movements for a "virtual dance installation" at Cooper Union in New York last winter, and the dancer Molissa Fenley participated a year ago in a three-way performance from New York, Tokyo and Helsinki, Finland, sponsored by a museum in Finland.

"Dancers are old-fashioned," said Martha Wilson, the founding director of Franklin Furnace, a New York venue for performance artists that now offers live performances, including dance, on the Web. "They hear the word 'body' and think about flesh and blood. They don't make a leap to the body in question: the Net itself as a circulatory system."

Right now, Ms. Weis is arranging a program called "Tales Exchange" that will take root in Skopje, Macedonia, this fall. At the Mot International Theater Festival in October in Skopje, she and Frank London, a composer and musician, and at least one other dancer will set up an ongoing performance choreographed by Ms. Weis. The collaboration, shaped around short stories that define the American and Macedonian cultures, will unfold in periodic live performances on the Web.

"I think of it as a 3-D fairy tale," Ms. Weis said.

You could also call it cyber-reality, a melding of two very different aspects of her dance, the physical and the digital. Ms. Weis smiled at the notion. "When I move my hands, it feels like two different bodies," she said. "This dancing thing is so wild when it's related to my M.S."

Photos: A STARRING ROLE FOR THE INTERNET -- The choreographer Cathy Weis, in black, and Jennifer Monson performed in New York while real-time interactive images sent over the Web from Prague were projected on a screen behind them.

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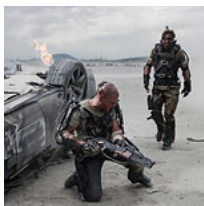
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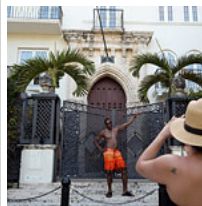
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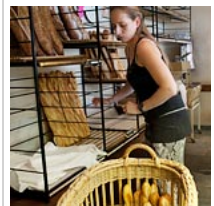
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