

chael Palin, Neil Innes, and Carol Cleveland, and I find it hard to tell one of them from another—except of course for Ms. Cleveland, the only *real* woman in the group, who plays (among other parts) a travel agency receptionist who asks a customer, with cool, professional courtesy, "Have you come to arrange a holiday, or would you like a blow-job?"

What was I saying? Oh yes. The Flying Circus is, however, a highly disciplined ensemble, in which everyone works with admirable economy, comic seriousness, and British restraint, clowning madly, but without self-indulgence. (No director is credited; presumably the Pythons do it all collectively.) It is possible to grow quite attached to the Pythons; when the familiar little cartoon that opens their TV segments went on at the City Center, with its jaunty music, its opening heads, large squashing foot, and small fat flying man, I found myself feeling even a little sentimental. In spite of my foreboding that Pythonism may be a harbinger of a yet more decadent future, if there were a "Monty Python's Flying Circus" Anthem, I would sing it. □

We Cease To Be Victims of the Past

Quarry

An opera conceived and directed by Meredith Monk, performed by The House and others, at La Mama Annex, East 4th Street

If the Prophets

A solo concert by Margo Sherman, at Theater for the New City, 131 Jane Street, 691 2220.

BY ARTHUR SAINER

One of the mysteries of art is its ability to transform pain into spiritual comfort, to metamorphose anguish at horrendous events into a suffusing, succoring joy. Unlike history, which mobilizes the past and turns on it a sometimes dazzling analytic searchlight, art forces a reliving of the experience; it is another kind of analysis, a re-forming of actions. In this re-

forming we suffuse the remembered actions with nothing less than our humanity, much as if we were tending a wounded animal or nurturing plants in a window box when the impulses of the spirit are transmitted through our fingers. We have ceased to be victims of the past and have become collaborators in a move toward transcendence: At its best the remembered actions are drained of past evil and take on a sanctity through our replaying.

These thoughts are prompted by two lovely works, Meredith Monk's "QUARRY" and Margo Sherman's "IF THE PROPHETS." "Quarry," an epic opera performed by Monk, the members of The House, and several dozen additional performers, is essentially an abstraction of a Jewish coming to consciousness and a growing up both during and after the events of the Holocaust, and it is also the playing out of that Holocaust. So that the work is on several levels: the private concerns of a girl in a privileged household—but there is already anguish in these private moments—and the private concerns of several adults related to the girl, balanced against public, mass spectacles which in time envelop these private lives. And also a complicated level of time, for the girl seems both to be living through the growth of her thirties and awakening to its horrors at a later moment in history. And the work is so constructed that the spectator comes as late to the consciousness of fascist horrors as the girl does.

There is a wonderful eye for detail, both of objects and movements. The long space of La Mama Annex is intermittently drained of emptiness by domestic groupings: Orthodox Jewish couple in traditional blacks, husband poring over Scripture or perhaps Talmud; three girls at a dinner table in a bourgeois household, light source a lamp with a fat, comforting base; an older bourgeois couple, husband in maroon-colored robe, reading peacefully, wife in simple black dress and pearls, upright, dignified; another relative in long print dress, clacking heels, re-

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Meredith Monk's "Quarry": visions that transcend suffering

Theatre

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hearsing for a part; and in the center the sleeping, troubled, or waking, feverish girl, watched over by comic maid, dusting, peeping out windows.

The groupings sometimes evoke a sense of ineffectuality, of giddiness, but often of devotion, in the bourgeois households to a way of material and intellectual life, or in the Orthodox setting to a Supreme Being. The girl, even less effectual and more vulnerable than the others, nevertheless seems to be in the throes of some half-understood anguish that goes past the silly whining about "My head, my ears, my eyes." She is Monk's "vessel," apprehending the beginnings of something that will later come to be understood as the fascist mining of victims, or "quarrying," and the fascist forces will be represented by grotesque or comic dictators or the supremely evil dictator in business suit, the insidious "banality" of the business suit, that eventually takes over the space, or the terrible sight of mass, choraling youth in fascist, body-building movements that choke the space.

There is so much in the Monk opera, and in fact it seems to me overproduced, but it is a work of beautiful devotion, and I haven't even begun to mention the warbles and staccato cries and other sounds that help compose this remembering of six million Jews.

In production terms, Margo Sherman's "If the Prophets" is at the opposite end of the spectrum. The entire cast is one young woman, barely moving against a simple print backdrop. In the first half of the program, Ms. Sherman performs "She Makes a Speech," a monologue by Avram Patt, and appears as an elderly Jewish woman, offering the spectator homely, comic wisdom about kinds of love, about receiving telephone calls, about visiting temporarily sick friends in semiprivate rooms in hospitals. Patt's monologue is in the tradition of Sholem Aleichem; it is love tinged with skepticism and it is about very practical things, about getting on on this earth and being a decent person while doing it.

As Ms. Sherman performs it, a wonder of gnarled, bosomy warmth in a high-pitched voice, a brew of distress and amiability, it is ultimately a hilarious chicken-soup sonata. And then the miracle of transformation: A lovely sylph of a girl, soft black tresses, flowing white dress, and bare feet, appears to perform a series of poems by Nelly Sachs. And it is no simple recitation but a true concert, as Sherman allows the terrible images from Sachs's poems to inhabit her. Poems written by a woman whose comfortable existence as an upper-class Jew was shattered by the Nazi takeover, a woman who, in a displaced state, had to tunnel inside herself to find the spiritual resources that then truly made her a woman and truly made her a Jew.

It seems to me that Ms. Sherman, in these beautiful renderings which seem *lived* more than offered, has also had to become displaced, to tunnel into herself, like Sachs, like Ms. Monk, to understand what love means in the face of calamity. The intensity and range of her performance is a wonderfully odd balance to the deceptively simpler portrayal of the comic old lady whose concern

is also about survival through love.

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On Saturday I made my way past a procession of merrily painted figures proceeding clownlike through SoHo. I was in a hurry to stop off at a marathon benefit for UTO, a collection of artists from theatre, film, music, and painting, whose loft at 597 Broadway had been partially gutted by fire. My friend Elizabeth Converse then told me, as I looked through UTO's block long interior and smelt evidence of their recent catastrophe, that the procession was part of the day's entertainment.

The depth of the UTO space is quite impressive and the plans for reopening UTO as a collectivity are ambitious. Frankly, UTO would simply be another name to me if not for the presence of my friend Converse, as she likes to call herself, former member of the Performance Group and the Bridge Collective. She's an intense and intensely interesting young presence, a fighter, a dreamer, and these words will probably embarrass her but they're true.

She tells me that UTO's going to reopen on May 7 with Philippe Doinel's Odyssey Repertory group doing "The Lower Depths." I asked Converse how Voice readers could help UTO and she said, "Just tell them to come and see the work." So I have.