

Walker Commission

Meredith Monk and Ann Hamilton

Featuring the Meredith Monk Vocal Ensemble

Songs of Ascension

Thursday-Saturday, June 12-14, 8 pm

\$29 (\$24, Walker members)

McGuire Theater



Meredith Monk can chart every bead of inspiration on her new necklace of voice, music, and theater. She points to poet Norman Fischer's translations of the Psalms, which Monk stitched to her own fascination with the human impulse to "ascend." She tells of reconnecting with visual artist Ann Hamilton, a past collaborator, after hearing she was creating a tower. What Monk can't do is say how *Songs of Ascension*, the show she's stringing together with those beads, will ultimately look when she wears it in public. "We're trying to hang out in the unknown right now, which is what art is about," she says.

Nobody navigates the unknown quite like Monk. Through 40 years of composition and production, she has blurred, broken, and redefined the bounds of interdisciplinary performance—creating her own sonic pallet, experimenting with story forms, and influencing two generations of artists through her signature stew of movement, instrumental music, and vocalizations. With *Songs of Ascension*, she is working in a grand scale of gesture and ambition, melding chanted vocals and an orchestra score into a piece of multimedia theater honoring "architectural and ritual motifs of ascension from throughout the world."

"There are certain psalms whose titles can be translated into 'Songs of Ascent,' and we have this tradition of going up mountains—going to the top of Mount Zion, the Aztecs climbing the steps of the temple—and this up-and-down movement is cross cultural," Monk says of her initial creative sparks for this piece. "Ann called to ask if I would sing for the opening of her *Tower*, and I thought it would be interesting to pull those strands together."

Earlier this year, Monk focused her attention on the music, transcribing her own recordings for her musicians and vocalists. This is no easy feat—time signatures can change from bar to bar, and the musicians will have to memorize the score. She also had her vocal ensemble sing to the sounds of Indian instruments called shruti boxes. The artist considers some of the music "processional."

"The way voices are working together is so cool. Even though there are fewer people, it's a bigger sound," she says. "The music I'm working with already has this up and down dimension, and what I'm interested in is up and down and around—that sculptural dimension—and that's something we're working on for the theater, where the sound is really coming around you. The challenge for me right now is the orchestration—weaving together these different elements of who is going to be doing what."

Unlike 2001's *Mercy*, which infused Hamilton's visual imagery and physical presence through Monk's theatrical/vocal performance, *Songs of Ascension* is less a collaboration than independent creative explorations that will, somehow, find their way together. Hamilton's *Tower* is a 60-foot permanent installation in Healdsburg, California—photographs illustrating *Songs of Ascension* were taken there, when Monk's ensemble sang at the unveiling of the work. Monk doesn't want to create a set piece that replicates *Tower*, so she has her eye on the McGuire Theater's upper reaches, including its three-sided balcony, to illustrate ascension—in body and voice. As part of this work-in-progress, Hamilton is mulling over a system of video displays that would wrap around the inside of the theater.



Photos: Marion Gray

"[*Mercy*] ended up being a manifestation of the creative process of two human beings. The first image of the piece—the two of us sitting at opposite ends of a table—was what the piece was about. There was some struggle involved, and that's a part of the creative life," says Monk. "It's really not easy working with someone else, because Ann and I are both intuitive artists and neither of us likes to verbalize what we're working on. Neither of us needs a collaborator, but Ann and I have a deep level of trust and respect for each other. This is part of stretching my boundaries and asking myself, after 43 years, 'How do I stand at the edge?'"

—Matt Peiken, *Walker* managing editor

Co-commissioned by the Walker Art Center with support provided by the William and Nadine McGuire Commissioning Fund and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Made possible by the Doris Duke Fund for Dance of the National Dance Project, a program administered by the New England Foundation for the Arts, and by the Contemporary Art Centers network, administered with major support from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation by the New England Foundation for the Arts.

The Walker Art Center's Music Season is sponsored by

Sponsor



Media partners

