

Laurie Anderson: Genius? Earthmother?

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BY DR. TANTALUS

Genius? Earthmother? Avante-garde guru? Political commentator? Purveyor of fine snake oils? Laurie Anderson was all these things and more in her recent appearance at the "Schnitz," delighting and amazing a capacity crowd with her visual techniques, vocal disguises and humorous stories. America's premier performance artist had done it — again.

Attempting to define performance art is a little like, well, trying to define art. You know it when you see it, but every time you think you've got a handle on it, whoops! it changes again.

Music

Anderson's most recent performance piece presented a series of overlapping and recurrent themes that focused on the present mental and political health of this nation. Making no excuses for such an approach, Anderson noted that it only seemed appropriate to explore political art songs because so many singers have turned into politicians and because so many politicians have started to "sing."

Appearing on stage wearing a stark black outfit, this diminutive performer was dwarfed by the gigantic 20 feet by 30 feet screen that rose up from the stage. Underneath were three smaller 6 feet by 8 feet screens and to the side were two tall video towers, 6 feet by 25 feet that also projected images. As the songs rolled by, the projected images added additional layers of meaning to the overall atmosphere. A more impressive, imaginative video display can hardly be imagined. These "videos" were to MTV what fiber optic communications is to Marconi's wireless.

As the various images rolled by, Anderson stood alone on stage, singing and playing her

various synthesizers, as well as her famous amplified violin, which uses pieces of recording tape in the bow to produce strange and wondrous sounds. All of this was done with a precision not seen since the Prussian Army began invading France in 1914. Each piece of music corresponded exactly to the desired visual image being displayed. Anderson takes chances with her art, but not with how it's presented.

As the show progressed, a certain symmetry developed as Ms. Anderson's political themes began to foreshadow one another, rolling back on top of themselves to create a unique whole. If an occasional point was lost in the process it seemed not to detract from the overall message but to add an air of mystery and excitement to the proceedings.

One of Anderson's particular talents is an ability to take simple matters and make us see their depth and meaning. She explores the basics of life that we have assimilated and forgotten and forces us to question the daily assumptions that underpin our lives. In short, she asks us to think again about what we do, any why we do it. The answers may not always be clear, but she is suggesting a method, not a solution.

While such an approach could be pretentious in the hands of another, less gifted performer, Anderson makes no claims to superior knowledge. She broke that wall down early in the performance by noting "Yankee Doodle Dandy," which she referenced as the "B" side to the national anthem: "Yankee Doodle came to town/ riding on a pony/ put a feather in his hat/ and called it macaroni." Anyone who can understand the lyrics of this song can understand anything in the avant garde art world, she declared. The audience laughed in recognition.

While the lyrics to some of her songs can seem abstract and abstractly evocative, Anderson's political commentary was sharp and to the point. She publically defended the controversial gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, on stage. (The late Mapplethorpe's pictures of Anderson appear on both the front and back covers of her latest

album, "Strange Angels.") Jesse Helms doesn't want to see his work, she declared, and therefore he doesn't think that you should see it either. Right on, Laurie!

These pointed references fail to express Anderson's contagious sense of humor. Her unique timing makes much of that humor transitory, like much of comedy. But the Doctor and Nurse Consuelo can assure you that their sore ribs after the concert were due to the spontaneous and hard laughter that followed each Anderson witticism, each piece of life exposed to its essence, and each reminder of the socially-induced blinders that we all wear.

Of course the main purpose of the evening's performance was to hear Laurie Anderson's music; she did not disappoint. Pre-recorded music can sometimes weight a performer down, but Ms. Anderson used it to her benefit as a backdrop for her unique tape-bow violin, her new-found soprano and her trademark minimalist synthesizer style.

Facing a battery of microphones she was able to sing three different parts depending upon which mike she was singing into: one would amplify her own voice, another would alter her voice and make it sound like someone else, while a third set would produce a female backup chorus. The overall effect, combined with the visual images projected across the stage, was stunning.

In Anderson's world whales in captivity ask: "Do all oceans have walls?" Ronald Reagan sings "Starlight, starbright" to lull his listeners into sleep. The speeches of Benito Mussolini become arias from operas. History is an angel being blown backward into the future by a storm called progress. Political debate is no more coherent than the unconnected sentences by which we learned to read in grade school (and the other kids act like all the sentences make sense). The national anthem is a series of unresolved questions (Hey! do you see something over there? I can't tell. It might be a flag. Is something burning?)

Those who missed the concert can still enter this unique world by catching her latest album, "Strange Angels." Like the concert, the album displays a musicality that is sometimes unexpected from a performer of such direct political intentions. Your friends will never know the difference without reading the lyrics if you just start it playing. Just another pop album, you know.

Yeah, right.



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