



By Jo McCulty

Bebe Miller instructs a winter quarter dance class.

In Ohio, dancer/choreographer Bebe Miller finds space to move

By SUSAN WITTSTOCK
onCAMPUS staff

Dance students in Bebe Miller's freshman technique class don't act overly awed by their professor, who has established herself as one of the country's top choreographers since earning her master of arts in dance from Ohio State in 1975.

She smiles and shakes her head at the notion that the young students would be impressed with her career. She prefers that they see her at a more grounded level.

"I think they are relieved that I laugh in class. They see that a dance artist is a person. I think they are probably surprised that I'm not as loud and forward as they might expect," she said.

Perhaps Miller, who is somewhat soft-spoken in conversation, expresses herself most loudly through dance. She is responsible for a body of work that has tackled issues of identity, race, social justice and human relationships, all the while exploring and experimenting with the power of pure movement.

Ohio State audiences will get the chance to see Miller's choreography when the Bebe Miller Company performs *Verge* in Sullivant Theatre Feb. 14-16. The performances are jointly sponsored by the Wexner Center for the Arts and the Department of Dance.

Last fall, when she joined the faculty in Ohio State's nationally ranked dance department, Miller entered a new phase in her career. Like many of the dances she choreographs, the change in her life is not entirely linear. She has taught off and on throughout her career as a dancer and a choreographer, and although she is now a professor, she continues to choreograph and work with her New York-based dance company.

"I thought this would be a good time to make a shift. I'm at a point as a mid-career artist, where my method of making art has changed in terms of time and resources," Miller said. "On a practical level, it's a good way to support my research and allow for more development while I'm making a living. It's the best of both worlds."

Her appointment has her teaching graduate and undergraduate courses during winter and spring quarters.

She believes that teaching makes her a better choreographer. "Teaching helps me to objectify my process. As a choreographer, the verbal articulation of what I'm doing affects what I create," she said.

Miller danced with the company Nina Wiener and
See Miller, page 17

Miller ...
from page 1

Dancers from 1976 to 1982 before forming her own company in 1984. She has choreographed for the Phoenix Dance Company in England, the PACT Dance Company of South Africa, the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, Oregon Ballet Theatre and the Boston Ballet. She has received three "Bessie" New York Dance and Performance Awards (the dance equivalent to Tony Awards), as well as fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Miller has worked with the Wexner Center several times. Among other projects, the center commissioned and premiered *Nothing Can Only Happen Once* in 1993, and, in 1998, co-commissioned *Going to the Wall*, which was performed at Ohio State with *The Hendrix Project*.

Miller began dancing as a child growing up in Brooklyn, but by the time she entered Earlham College, she was more interested in studying art. She rediscovered dance during her college years, though, and after earning a degree in art in 1971, she moved to New York to pursue a dance career. After two years, she entered Ohio State for formal training as a dancer and a choreographer. "It gave me more of a sense of where I fit into the continuum. My dances had a history and a place," she said.

After graduating, she joined the dance company led by Wiener, whom she had met when Wiener was a visiting artist in the dance department. Embarking on a dance career was "a more political decision than I realized," Miller said.

Because she is African American, many critics and audiences were quick to characterize her work purely in terms of ethnicity, and assumed that she had a particular political agenda.

She finds that interpretations are less narrow in today's culture. "I think the world is much more comfortable now with variety," she said.



By Jo McCulty

Using *Verge* as an example, she pointed out the multiple layers of diversity found within the quartet of dancers: black/white, male/female, gay/straight.

Verge premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York in February 2001 and received Bessie awards for Miller's choreography, Hahn Rowe's music, and Michael Mazzola's lighting and Scott Pask's set design.

At its most basic level, the piece is about touch. "That's a starting point," Miller said. "From earlier works, I've always been interested in the space between people and the quality of skin-to-skin contact."

Verge is danced by Ted Johnson, Melissa Wynn, Darrell Jones and Angie Hauser Robinson, who recently earned her MFA in dance from Ohio State.

"I hadn't made a quartet in a long time and never an evening-length quartet," Miller said. "It's one of my best pieces because

everybody is so visible — there's a certain starkness to it."

Her method of choreography continues to evolve.

"Age has a lot to do with it," said Miller, who is 51. "At this point, I'm dealing with how to visualize something I can't do myself, and how much is my own physicality a part of that? I want to be able to verbalize as well as show, and then refashion. That way, you get to ask for the impossible."

In her early days of choreographing, she used to think that if a piece was really obscure, it was really good. She is more interested now in being understood, but not at the expense of sophistication or complexity. "My job as a choreographer is to sit back and say, 'If I saw this once, what would I think?'"

She said she'll just have to see how Columbus audiences respond to *Verge*.

"In New York, I feel more that I'm dancing for my peers. They come to see what you're doing," she said. "In other places, they respond more to the work, not to where I am in the field. I've always enjoyed that about touring."

Making the leap away from New York City, not only to tour, but to work and live, is becoming more common among Miller's dance peers.

"I'm not the only choreographer doing this," Miller said. "I think this kind of seeding into the field is going to be happening a lot more, now that the market is so tight. I'm very interested to see what will happen in the field in five years or so when the people we're teaching get out there."

For Miller, the Midwestern move is sweetened by the chance to live a lifestyle not affordable in New York, including purchasing a home of her own, as well as having the luxury of being able to view the horizon after only a 20-minute drive.

She has gained new regard for her faculty colleagues. "There's an incredible dedication on their part. I have enormous respect for the amount of work they do," she said. "I feel that I'm working with stars. They have a tremendous background."

And as for working with those freshman dancers?

"I'm used to teaching advanced dancers, so it's tricky. I have to be clearer. There is no shorthand," she said.

Youthful enthusiasm helps, though.

"Freshmen love the fact that they're in college now," she said. "I enjoy them a lot."

Verge will be performed at 8 p.m. Feb. 14-16 in Sullivant Hall. Call 292-3535 for tickets.