Artifice more than art on display from Dance Workshop

MIT DANCE WORKSHOP
A Concert of Student Works-In-Progress.

Directed by Beth Soil
Friday, December 2 and 3.

By CHRISTOPHER J. ANDREWS

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Stacey Steinberg '89 had the most fluid solos showcased each dancer's talents. The concert was held at Little Kresge's Housecleaning, supported by the MIT Dance Workshop. The recital featured some innovative uses of sound, and was far stronger in this respect than last year's performances. Following the recent enchantment avant garde musicians have had with "found sound," Carol Schneider opened the evening with "Lucia" which served to build a context for the choreography, creating new works that relate to the dance, or by generating sounds during the performance itself.

The most avant garde work of the evening, "Lucia" was unique because much of the accompanying soundtrack was relayed to Little Kresge's Housecleaning. Each dancer, modulated by her voice, was picked up by an electronic detector and changed into sound effects that were grown organically from the dancers' movements. Furthermore, a background of pauses created a network of invisible beams - each time Kenney crossed a beam of light, a distinctive sound was relayed to Little Kresge's Housecleaning. With this kind of setup, no two performances will be exactly alike because the dancer won't always cross the light beams at identical moments or locations. (The flashlight itself used to create the light beams unfortunately blinded some members of the audience and completely defeated any "light" that was intended.)

While the exact relationship between the dancer's movements and the audible sounds was probably a secret to the audience until the post-concert discussion session, "Lucia" nonetheless a legitimate attempt pushing toward what may be a new perception of the relationship between dance and music. A 19th-century composer might write music that contains rhythms and figures appropriate for dancer's feet and legs; Ravel and Fokine worked for a more impressionistic and less literal connection between the two in the early 20th century, with each contributing to the other's success. In our time, dancers have been striving still further to create a meaningful relationship between the two. While "Lucia" only touches upon the possibilities of performer-generated sounds, and the relationships of sight and sound isn't easy to perceive in this case, it is an example of the finest kind of innovation.

Wonderfully absent from the evening's works were the weak efforts to incorporate highly unusual soundtracks into lithe and limber dances. All too frequently in modern performance, including some past Dance Workshop recitals, unimpressed dancers have tried to hide in the shadows of the most avant-garde sound-tracks, as if the dancer can join the newest "clubs" without making a genuine contribution. This year's Dance Workshop members have avoided this tendency by choosing soundtracks that only reinforce ideas already present in the choreography, creating new works that relate to the dance, or by generating sounds during the performance itself.

Perhaps the best reason for the recital's critical acclaim is that it focused attention on little details and acknowledged that these little bits were interesting. While some members of the audience complained that the performed works were "not up-to-date" and were "just movement," it must be remembered that they are not necessarily completed works. Beth Soil wisely titles the program "A Concert of Student Works-in-Progress," an imprecise name which characterizes the exploratory nature of the works, but we may acknowledge that art, an essential step in the creation of a finished art form.

Another wise move was to preface the program with ten-old minutes of improvisation, which served to build a context for appreciating the subsequent works. Members of the audience unfamiliar with modern dance were given "viewing hints" and "audience notes" which suggested some of the kinds of things to watch for: subtle variations upon a single "movement idea" as performed by several dancers. The recital featured some innovative uses of sound, and was far stronger in this respect than last year's performances.