

# Meredith Monk's "Volcano Songs"

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## 1. The purpose

Monk performed "Volcano Songs" on Oct. 18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> in 1997 in Saitama Art Theater. Premiered at P.S. 122 in May 11 1994 in New York, it has many items Monk used. The purpose of this research is to identify the elements Monk has used in "Volcano Songs" as Monk's media in order to indicate her theme. I'd also like to adapt her choreographic way here to her theory towards the whole art works. Monk used to say "the art is basically a language of perception and spirit and feelings<sup>1</sup>." She believes in the universality of art. I apply her theories to the theme she portrays in the "Volcano Songs."

## 2. The image we can read from the elements.

A big red cloth is spread in the center, and three small black clothes are on the right. Frosted glass is hung on the left and a wig with three braids is underneath. There are four black boxes on the back, and a pair of black gloves and a brassiere. In scene 1, the red color of the cloth shows the fire of the volcano. It is evidence that the earth is breathing and alive. The red is also the color of blood. We easily imagine all the beings in the world, and their births and deaths. In scene 2, we believe that she is waving happily behind the glass, but actually she is struggling. What we see is not always what is. The standing braids indicate her surprise, fear, and sadness. In scene 3, Monk's body shadows on the panels have the audience recall the tragedy of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. The shadow of a human being was flashed on to the stairs of a building in Hiroshima city when the blast occurred and still exists there today. In scene 4, many faces on the screen are looking at the front. They seem to be in charge of the earth. Monk starts to sing and looks at the unchanged earth from the ancient age and the current times of the living people. When the vegetables come up from the boxes, we even feel something funny and some light relief. These items are so familiar to us that we feel more comfortable and relax. Her voice work is one of the elements. She uses voice mainly in scene 1 & 4. she doesn't pronounce any recognizable word nor speak a language. The audience receives an impression and an atmosphere. She uses the maximum possibility of the abstractness of the voice.

## 3. The theme of the "Volcano Songs"

The performance isn't complicated to understand. It's rather easy and simple. We have to find the hidden meanings in the sample items on the stage. The theme is the praise and reverence of the earth, the destruction and creation, and the life and death in the world. We find many relations with the important things in the elements on the stage.

Although Monk's way of expressing the theme doesn't impose too much on the audience, we feel a stronger and purer message from it. The theme is a big one for all humanity, and is imminent to everybody. It is the message as our own matter.

## 4. Monk's theory

Monk always says "the art is basically a language of perception and spirit and feelings." This means the art comes from inside of our hearts, and the art shows the insights of human beings. In "Volcano Songs" the feeling are the fear, the surprise, and the sadness. There is the fear from the exploration, the exploration, the surprise of the strength of life, and the sadness of the distractions. Monk keeps her art theory to her performance stage. Even though the theme and the elements in each piece are different, she has the same concept that the art is an essential need for our society.

## 5. The conclusion

In conclusion, I find that the "Volcano Songs" is a very simple solo piece, but this piece holds many elements that indicate the important and complicated matters of our life and nature. Her voice work is also taking an important part there to express the coexistence of nature and human beings. The audience realizes that the problems are so close to them that everyone has a responsibility to solve these problems.

Monk tries to make the work of art for society. She creates the work not for enjoyment, but as a key to rethink the subject matter as something, which is our own problem. But the items she uses are easy and well-known elements. The audience feels familiar with her piece even though the theme is very serious and difficult to solve. That is why many people in the world love Meredith Monk's works of art.

<sup>1</sup> Meredith Monk, "Some Thoughts about Art," Dance Magazine, Sep. 1990 p.30