



HOMELAND [IN]SECURITY

LAURIE ANDERSON ON THE STATE OF AMERICA
BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Every festival has its own personality, and when performance artist Laurie Anderson is asked about what makes Spoleto Festival USA unique, she immediately mentions the open-minded audiences.

"It's a softer place," she says of the festival's host city, Charleston, where she'll be performing her newest work, *Homeland*. "People are up for something. They're not just going to pounce on you, and I really appreciate that attitude." Anderson, who first came to the festival in 1989 with the opera *Empty Places* and returned in 1999 with the music/theater piece *Songs and Stories from Moby Dick*, sees similarities in attitude between Charleston and San Francisco: "They're very smart people but they're more easygoing than the big 'factory mentality' towns like L.A."

Homeland will offer this year's festival-goers an intimate concert experience, featuring Anderson and

three other musicians, rather than a multi-media extravaganza. Standing on a darkened stage, Anderson tells stories and sings songs, often with her electric violin dangling from her neck like a third arm. Dreamy retellings of scenes from the ancient Greek satire *The Birds* glide into pointed political commentary with the refrain "Your silence is considered your consent," followed by a song about "the experts" that would feel right at home on a dance floor.

"If I had to analyze what *Homeland* is about," says Anderson, "a third of it is very political, a third is very beautiful and a third is music. It's not political in the sense of my saying, 'Here's what we should do.' Because obviously I don't know either and even if I did know, I wouldn't try to foist my opinions on people.

"It's a great time to be doing things that involve stories because we're really into analyzing stories right

now. Stories are magical. Stories can start wars. It doesn't even matter if they're true as long as they're good stories."

Anderson has been telling stories in one form or another her entire career. Born in an affluent suburb outside Chicago, Anderson—who turns 61 during Spoleto—has described a boring, safe world that gave her a hunger for the unusual. Even routine church-going—endured by kids everywhere—provoked Anderson, who talks in *Homeland* about starting a "snow religion," a faith where there's no good or bad, just "perfect crystals spinning in ecstasy."

"I kind of had my own religion," says Anderson of her childhood. "I was like a nature worshipper. I remember going to school and looking up at these trees that were 20 stories high. I remember if I felt bad I would go out and lie in the grass and look up at the sky. It was a religion for me."

She escaped—as children often do—and studied art history at Barnard College and received her MFA at Columbia. Playful, witty performance art pieces soon followed, such as a symphony played via car horns and slamming car doors. A bit of serendipity led to a song of hers being championed by legendary British deejay John Peel, turning "O Superman" into a No. 2 hit in the UK. Major record labels came calling, and Anderson soon parlayed their interest into funding for massive multi-media works like *United States* and eventually the 1986 feature film *Home of the Brave*. Anderson became arguably the most popular, best-known performance artist in the world, and in the process redefined and expanded the role of the artist vis-a-vis the mainstream.

But even this brief description doesn't begin to scratch the surface of her work, which ranges from sculpture, music and theater pieces to film scores, books and inventions like the talking stick and the tape-bow violin. If anything characterizes the career of Anderson, it may be a playful sense of curiosity—she has notebooks filled with scraps of information, stray bits of conversation, odd facts, interesting news articles, stories and images, all of it waiting to be mined for future works.

Anderson has maintained that curiosity on this current project by writing the piece on the road, constantly working in new elements and using a rotating group of musicians to perform it. Among the artists who have crossed her path during the creation of *Homeland* are a group of Tuvan throat singers from southern Siberia.

"I asked them to come play with me on this European tour," says Anderson. "It was a gorgeous

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Top: *Empty Places* at Spoleto Festival USA 1989, photo by William Struhs.

Bottom: *Songs and Stories from Moby Dick* at Spoleto Festival USA 1999, photo by William Struhs.



summer night and at the end they were packing up and getting ready to go. I realized their Russian manager had made no arrangements for them to get back to the hotel. So they were planning to walk back. It was a two-hour *drive*. But they're nomads so they were going to walk."

That's Anderson in a nutshell—intellectually curious, artistically adventurous and open to the amusing contradictions and juxtapositions of life on planet Earth (or "planet dirt" as one early draft of the show suggested the world should be called). No wonder her artist bio says Anderson is working on both a new album (drawn from *Homeland*) for the Nonesuch label and a "series of very long walks."

"I just like going on walks," laughs Anderson when asked if she was pulling an Art Garfunkel and walking across America in stages or some such ambitious project. "It's the same thing like doing multi-media performance art. You can say that a walk with your dog through very historic places is your artwork and people will go, 'Okay. I guess so.'

"So many things are included in art now. It started with John Cage saying, 'Sixth Avenue is a symphony. Just listen.' Then those Italian guys saying, 'This pile of

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dirt. That's art.' There's this artist in New York whose art is having affairs with collectors. That's her work. So walking with my dog; that's my work."

And Charleston is ideal for inspiration, "the perfect place to be outside all day," says Anderson. "I really enjoy walking around the small streets. It's a new piece I call 'Walking Around Charleston's Small Streets.'" ■

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