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## Music, dance come together in landmark 'Ocean' performance

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WAITE PARK — The stars didn't shine over the stage at the bottom of the Rainbow Quarry on Thursday evening, and a few stray drops of rain even fell.

But that didn't stop the opening night performance of the sold-out landmark production of Merce Cunningham Dance Co.'s "Ocean."

The modern dance was presented in all of its grandeur with a 150-member local orchestra, 14 dancers and a crowd of about 1,200, all in-the-round and 100 feet below ground.

"Even for the Walker, it's the biggest we've been involved with in the center's history," Philip Bither, the performing arts curator for the Walker Art Center, said last week. "This project is such a key collaborative effort."

The chaos of it all came together in the granite amphitheater. The orchestra, playing in anarchic harmony, created the sounds of the ocean washing over the dancers. The electronic score played the part of the fish.

Sounds rolled over the audience from a 360-degree radius — a drone here and a sharp crash 400 feet away, always playing in seven layers — all with a slight reverb from the rock walls.

The dancers flowed with the watery sounds — steadily through the rolling waves and powerfully through the dynamic swells — sometimes in sync, but often a bit off from each other like the waves were keeping them apart.

"Ocean" is being co-produced by Merce Cunningham Dance Co. of New York and Minneapolis' Walker Art Center. It is co-presented by the College of St. Benedict and the University of Minnesota's Northrop Dance.

There were many collaborators, including quarry owner Martin Marietta Aggregates, the St. Cloud Symphony Orchestra and the city of Waite Park. That took the Walker out of its home environment in Minneapolis, which Bither found to be enlightening.

"I feel like I've gotten a glimpse of the communities involved," he said. "We're hoping it could lead to more collaborations in other communities in the future."

The dance was conceptualized by Cunningham, now 89, and composer John Cage before he died in 1992. It premiered in 1994 and has only been performed with a 150-member orchestra once before. This was the first time it was presented in a rock quarry.

The dance was as dynamic as the feat of staging the performance. From the first sight of the stage at

the bottom of the quarry until the final second ticked off the clocks, the production was one of a kind.

It was almost as frightening as it was awe-inspiring to be standing in the bottom of the quarry, watching water trickle down its striped granite walls from the rain that fell earlier in the day.

This production of "Ocean" has taken years of planning, but all the planning in the world couldn't stop Mother Nature.

It was scheduled for the driest month of the year, but Thursday's performance was almost rescheduled because of weather.

Thunder and lightning flashes filled the sky Thursday morning and the midmorning downpour of rain had many organizers concerned. Organizers decided at 4 p.m. to go on with the 8 p.m. show despite thick clouds.

Water that collected in the quarry was pumped out by Martin Marietta workers.

"Pumps moved the water out as it happened," said Martin Marietta site manager Mike Reinert.

Almost 4,000 people, including cast and crew, will witness the spectacle live during its three-day run. The production was filmed by Charles Atlas during dress rehearsals earlier in the week.

When all the staging equipment is moved out of the quarry following Saturday's final performance, quarry workers go back to mining it and the performance becomes a memory.

"There are quite a number of people who will witness it and continue to talk and think," said Merce Executive Director Trevor Carlson said Tuesday. "It has a life of its own beyond that. I think the quarry, too, is a footprint."

Bither said the production is something the entire Midwest can be proud of.

"For us, it's not so much about scale as it is importance of the artists and their work," Bither said.

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