

Arts

Feldman and Andrews:

Long friendship bears artistic fruit

By Christopher Arnott

Barbara Feldman started with modest aims: "I wanted to find a way to keep performing by staying in New Haven." Sold-out concerts and plenty of favorable reviews attest to her success. "Barbara Feldman and Dancers," the official name of the company she has led since 1981, has become a local dance institution. As with all institutions, there is pressure not only to keep the devoted fans happy but to continue to grow.

This weekend, Feldman rises to that challenge with a program of favorites from her repertory and an ambitious new work, "Labyrinth," which was developed with composer and jazz artist Dwight Andrews, who lived in New Haven for over a decade and is still closely identified with the city.

Feldman and Andrews have been friends since 1974. But until three years ago all their attempts to work together "kept getting put off," Feldman says. Then they created "Chant of Saints," an exploration of faith and community featuring Feldman's choreography and music for strings and percussion by Andrews.

Feldman calls that first collaboration "a marvelous association." It seemed inevitable that they would work together again.

They began planning "Labyrinth" last summer, each finding some ideas and patterns in the other's art. In the fall, Andrews' Mellon Fellowship took him to Rice University in Texas, but they stayed in constant touch. "We have some very large long distance phone bills," Feldman laughs.

It was important for both Feldman and Andrews that they actively influence each other rather than simply fit the dance to the music. "The dance mimics the music and vice versa. We arrived at the piece together," she says.

"We began by reading myths about labyrinths, then exploring the idea of passageways. It really became its own thing." "Labyrinth" features not only Feldman's choreography and



Barbara Feldman's solo dance, "Sisters," is part of her troupe's concert performance this week. JENNIFER W. LESTER

Andrews' original compositions (recorded by a group of seventeen musicians, many of them New Haven residents), but also a textual piece written by Andrews using voices and sounds.

The spoken passages include a reading of Federico Garcia Lorca's poem "Ballad of Little Square." "It's a poem about life, the innocence of childhood," Feldman says. They added it with the understanding that "we

didn't want to do just an interpretation of the poem."

Feldman prefers not to be too literal with her dances. In "Labyrinth" she didn't want to set up an actual maze, nor did she want to tell any specific story. "I tend not to make dances that are stories in a traditional sense. They're re-creations of things I observe."

This is one of the reasons why she embraces modern dance, although

she was trained in ballet and tap as a child, and still studies them. "I threw away my point shoes sometime in High School. My choreography has always been modern."

Her dancers, most of whom have been with the company since its inception, "contribute greatly" to the creative process, Feldman says. They are particularly helpful when she herself dances: "I have to determine how much I can perform and be in the piece, and still be the eyes, and handle the art direction..."

One of her solo pieces, "Sisters," structured improvisation to live music composed by Tony Finlayson, will close the first half of this weekend's concert. The company will also revive "Chant of Saints," the first Feldman/Andrews collaboration, and "Off the Court," which simulates a squash game, and, according to Feldman, is a favorite of children who see it. "Children like the more abstract pieces. Sometimes we underestimate them. I have a child myself, so I know that children are excited by art, and can see things adults don't."

Feldman gets a lot of fresh ideas from teaching dance classes at Yale — "it's a way to try new things." She stresses the importance of teaching in her work, and says "I haven't yet found the perfect balance. Performing is not something one will do for one's entire life. You have to make a choice of how to spend your time."

New Haven dance enthusiasts are happy with the choices Barbara Feldman has made so far, especially the one to stay in New Haven. "We've been around, working in the community for a long while. We love to tour, but New Haven's our base."

Barbara Feldman and Dancers will present "Labyrinth" and other works at the Educational Center for the Arts (corner of Audubon Street and Orange Street) this Thursday, Friday, and Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. For ticket reservations and other information call 787-4106. ♦