

## MIT Media Lab/Cambridge

*Aviary*: A Multimedia Performance

The thematic core of *Aviary*—a collaborative performance by Beth Galston, Ellen Sebring, and Sarah Skaggs—is “thoughts have wings.” The one-hour piece, staged at “The Cube,” MIT’s unusual four-story black box, sets as its task the creation of a mythic world of birds and fairy-tale narrative, while the audience looks on from opposing sets of bleachers facing a massive floor-to-ceiling layering of fabric scrims.

Ellen Sebring’s video, projected onto a suspended 10 1/2 x 14’ screen, focuses on the parallel worlds of an unlikely pair, a muscled woman in Southern California and a blond boy from a Norwegian village. The woman is oppressed by heat, and the boy by cold. The underlying tension of the narrative comes from two sources: anxiety about survival in either state—too much heat or too much cold—and anxiety about whether the wings of thought between the woman and boy will ever bring them together. As birds, the philosophic totem of the piece, achieve homeostasis by flying south in winter and north in summer, so the boy travels away from the cold and the woman escapes the heat by floating in a swimming pool.

Apparently, homeostasis comes when the woman and the boy meet while buying a newspaper. Not only is the video compelling because of the imposing size of the figures, but also because of the extraordinary aptness of some of the images: the woman’s face as she floats underwater and the boy’s luminescent hair, for example. What robs the video of some of its power is the voice-over narrative that tells too much about the author’s intent instead of leaving the audience in a more interesting state of conjecture.

Sarah Skaggs’s choreography interacts with the set and the video, as her body, dwarfed by the towering scrims, swoops and dives in fluid birdlike motions through gauzy passages into open spaces and disappears again. Environmental artist Beth Galston sometimes creates cool pools of light for Skaggs to dance in and sometimes black trees magically twinkled by mirrors and lights.

Sebring’s score uses twelve speakers to surround the performance with sound. The auditory accompaniment is apparently intended to bring the set, video, and dance elements together—and sometimes it accomplishes just that with digitally sampled bird sounds, narrative, and other electronic sound effects. But the music could be and should be, for the sake of this

grandiose multimedia event, more than accompanying sound effects; the whole piece, in fact, needs to go further, and the three elements need to be more closely coordinated if the intended dream mythic is to be achieved.



Beth Galston, Ellen Sebring,  
Sarah Skaggs—*Aviary*

*Aviary* was impressive with flashes of artistic brilliance. It prepares us to assume that a future collaboration between these formers of myth—Galston, Sebring, Skaggs—could hold even more promise.

—Kalo Clarke and  
Kim Alan Pederson