

ARTS & FILMS

'Aviary': Big project takes flight

By Christine Temin
Globe Staff

Birds have inspired dances from "Swan Lake" to "Arenas," the collaboration between choreographer Wendy Peron and 20 fantail pigeons at Jacob's Pillow last summer, to the new "Aviary," an equally adventurous project that involves 30-foot-tall scrim columns, a forest of black scrim "trees" magically illuminated by twinkling mirrored plexiglass, and a dancer, Sarah Skaggs, who swoops and dives and at one point sprouts wings.

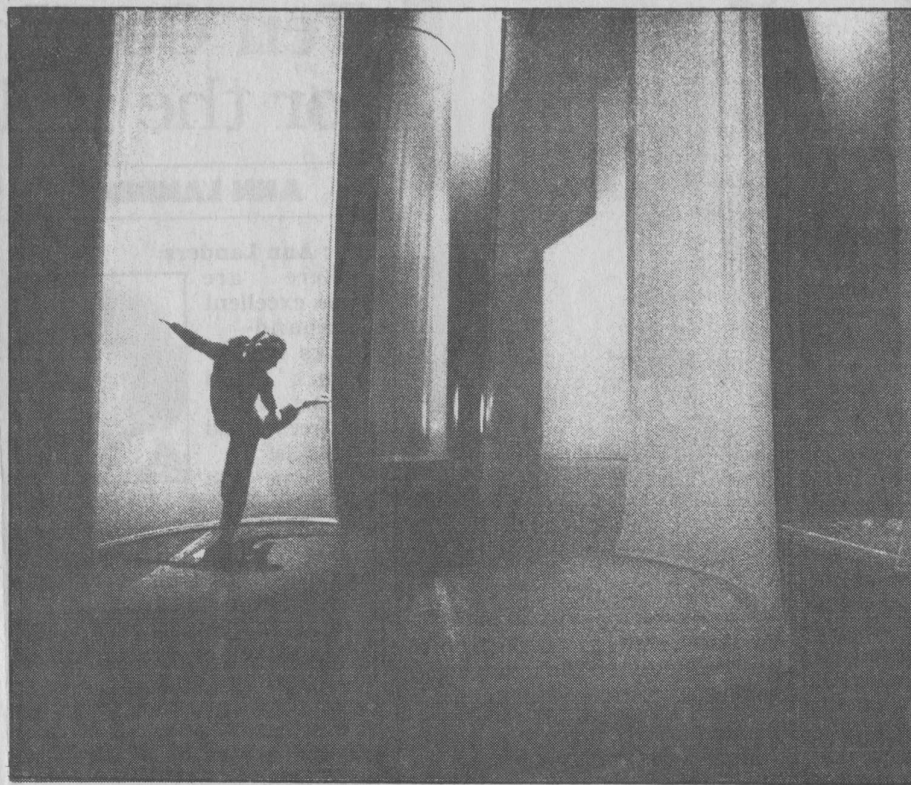
"Aviary" was the idea of two Boston artists, sculptor Beth Galston and video artist/composer Ellen Sebring, who have worked on the ambitious project for three years. The piece has its premiere tomorrow and runs through Sunday, in the Philippe Villiers Experimental Media Facility at MIT (The address is 20 Ames St., and the ticket number is 876-6838.) Given the unwieldy nature of the production — the huge gauzy columns and the almost equally enormous trapezoidal scrim panels that hover over them, a giant translucent video screen that slices the space in half, with the audience seated

on either side — it is sadly possible that this premiere weekend will also be "Aviary's" swan song: These grandiose multi-media events often prove too site-specific to survive a move.

"Aviary" grew out of another such project, the 1985 "Severe Clear," which had choreography by Dana Reitz and a heavenly atmosphere of light by James Turrell. Extremely successful though it was, "Severe Clear" was too complex to reconstruct, and after its few performances at Radcliffe's dance studio, the work was never performed again. Galston and Sebring were both part of the "Severe Clear" team, Galston working on the installation and Sebring on a video documentary of the project, and Skaggs danced in "Severe Clear." Galston and Sebring came up with the bird theme and enlisted Skaggs; they all visited a real aviary, and "Aviary" was under way.

The plot is a fairytale Sebring made up, about a boy from the remote mountains of Norway and a woman from southern California. He's cool; she's hot. The birds flying through the video are "messengers of thought." The story, the three collaborators said the other day during a rehearsal break, is on the borderline be-

tween earnest and ludicrous. Sebring's video and electronic score, Galston's scrims and lighting and Skaggs's dance all take turns dominating the piece. Sebring has worked on making the score spacious, using 12 speaker sources, so sound can come from above and below, in a pinpointed effect or a broad wash. Her video will be slow motion, all in dreamy blues. Galston's lighting creates a turquoise pool for Skaggs to dive into and a dappled forest for her to explore. Skaggs, mindful of the soaring, 46-foot height of the MIT space and of her role as a bird-woman, says she spends the whole dance looking up and much of it on tiptoe. The audience, however, will have to imagine the feeling of suspension instead of experiencing it as the collaborators briefly envisioned. "We thought of having the audience on swings hanging from the ceiling," Galston laughs.



Sarah Skaggs dances a scene from the ambitious multi-media event, "Aviary."