

# Mystic bird soars to new heights

## REMEMBER the woman who, this time last year, danced at dawn on Lamma island, dressed in flowing white robes and trailing white paper around her? Well, she's doing it again.

### Diana gets set for lift-off ...

At sunrise, mid-morning, noon, mid-afternoon, and moonrise, Diana Marto will enact another canto entitled *Passage in Light* of her ongoing worldwide/dance ritual, *Be the Bird that Soars in Your Dreams*.

Sounds crazy? Ridiculous? Just plain weird? As far as Diana Marto is concerned, however, her *Be the Bird* ritual is no flight of fancy.

Her evocative dancing, accompanied by an almost religious chant, aims at making the spectator a participant in acknowledging man's relationship to the earth, sky and heaven.

It aims at communicating the spirit of nature and the elements; serves to open up,

with a kind of Taoist healing power, feelings and emotions and to symbolise an expression of freedom and transformation.

If all this sounds even more bizarre, read on and take heed.

"I'm trying to create a communication of spirits," says Diana, whose strong facial features complement the strength of her words.

"Part of it is to be like a mirror so that other people can look in themselves and discover the same feelings and desire for freedom.

"In your daily life, you get stunted, you don't have the time to take a deep breath and really think about yourself and your relationship with the elements.

"My performance, I hope, gives people that chance to assess themselves. If they feel uncomfortable watching me, you know they must be uncomfortable with themselves.

"Their responses depend so much on their inner state — if my performance leads them to question those responses, that's an achieve-

ment, a therapeutic effect."

Diana Marto is what they call a performance artist. With a training in visual art, she has recently found her vocation in the avant-garde movement of "lifelike art" that experiences the meaning of life rather than intellectualising it.

Futurists, Dadas, body artists, performance poets, shamanistic artists and conceptualists are all concerned with lifelike art. Not with its opposite — "artlike art" — which is supported by high culture's institutions such as galleries, museums, concert halls, theatres and so on.

Lifelike art reaches beyond such limitations and beyond specific art genres to the general scope of life itself.

Finding meaning in a walk in the country, a visit to the grocery store or in that notorious pile of bricks that caused such controversy in London's Tate Gallery some years ago is all part of lifelike art. As was the performance by Kodo, the Drummers and Dancers of Sado, in the Arts Festival a few weeks ago.

ASKED to explain what the drum sounds symbolised, the director of the group replied: "I can't explain in words. The most important thing is to feel at one with the sounds of nature; you can see, you can hear, you can feel — that's what it's all about."

The recent performance in Hongkong by Merce Cunningham, with "music" by John Cage is another example.

You're not meant to fit them into a "high-art" pigeon-hole. You can't, because they are more a process of events with no definite outline.

The "meaning" or "message" of such art is not fixed — it depends entirely on you, the audience and the participant.

Seen in this context, Diana Marto's dance ritual has more relevance to our lives than may at first seem apparent.

The therapeutic effect, for

the dance.

How this is achieved and how the seeds of the idea were sown in Diana's mind are not essential to understand. But they are interesting to know about, if only to discover why she links art and life in the way she does.

It all started with a dream.

"It was just before a rehearsal for the performance of *Celebration* given in the Landmark two years ago," says Diana.

"I was to do a fan dance, dressed in black. In my dream I saw myself descending from the clouds like a bird, down a long ladder.

"That ladder seemed to represent the path to reality. At the rehearsal next day, I discovered I did indeed have to walk down a ladder to the crowds below. And when I saw photographs of the event afterwards, I saw that my dancing figure, caught in the spotlight, looked like a black bird inside an egg."

ALWAYS attracted by the movement of flight — "it's such a symbol of freedom and weightlessness" — Diana was profoundly affected by this dream and performance.

The idea afterwards for a series of dance rituals under the name *Be the Bird that Soars in Your Dreams*, came to her, she says, "automatically," in a way that she had experienced previously in her work as an artist in America when it would often happen that "inspiration would suddenly make me draw something or write something, al-

By JULIA W

most without my being aware of it."

Diana agrees that she believes in a "a kind of mystical power."

The fate that drew her to Asia five years ago is acknowledged as more than just good luck.

"So many things have happened to me as a result of my coming to Hongkong," she says.

"It's been an incredibly vital place for me. When I was in California, I was working almost entirely on monoprinting. But now, here in Hongkong, my art has encompassed far more. The monoprints that I did recently on the theme of my dance are, as a result, some of the strongest prints I have ever done."

Diana's attraction to





Diana Marto in action at sunrise.

Picture by Henry Chan.

close affinity with the Shinto beliefs. In a year's study of traditional Japanese arts in Kameoko and Tokyo, she was also particularly fascinated by the powerful symbolism of paper in religious ceremonies.

Once, she made a visit to the paper shrine where the goddess is believed to have revealed the secret of paper-making.

"It was a memorable experience for me," says Diana.

"When I went up there, I had a fantasy about paper emanating from the sky. This I later included in my dance ritual, making my use of white paper a vital part of my performance.

## VILKINSON

"I suppose, therefore, my dance is like a paper ceremony."

Following the same transformation in her enactment of the bird in the egg to the bird that soars in a dream, the paper in Diana's performance is gradually transformed from its lifeless state in a cylindrical roll to being stretched out in a graphic design; from there to being gathered up and wrapped around the dancer ("like being inside the egg"), then used like wings and finally, in the enactment of her fantasy at the shrine, being torn apart and thrown in the air, to fall down gently from the sky.

The process of transformation is the essence of Diana's performance, and the vital link between the paper ceremony and the human-to-bird dance.

"The white paper or silk that I use is symbolically so simple," explains Diana.

"But in my dance I try to show the many different things it can do and can represent. And the dance itself shows how free and expressive you can be as a person.

"If you have this kind of image of transformation, I believe you're more expanded as a person, more outward in your daily life."

Paper also has its own therapeutic associations in the Taoist belief, as Diana found out to her delight some time after she had been attracted to its use in her dance.

"Taoists believe that there's a healing power in a piece of paper that has been written on by a medium and then applied to the ill part of the body," explains Diana.

"When I found this out, I was even more convinced of the part paper has to play in my dance. The healing power of my performance is very strong for me."

Whether it's strong for the onlookers is another matter, of course.

Indeed, it's hard to believe that all these symbolic associations — the freedom of flight symbolising the freedom of one's own personality and feelings; the transformation from egg to bird symbolising the transformation and expansion one should encourage in oneself; and the use of paper symbolising a healing power — are all appreciated by the spectators at Diana's performances.

But perhaps it doesn't matter. For lifelike art is more about a practice of enlightenment than an attempt at analysis and theorising.

Like therapy and meditation, it acts as a bridge into daily affairs.

Diana is asking only that her performances "should touch people in some way." And so far, it has certainly done that. Her various enactments of *Be the Bird that Soars in Your Dreams* around the world — in New York, Kyoto and on Lamma — have, says Diana, "often elicited something very personal from the spectators.

"People have told me incredible stories about themselves after seeing a performance."

The mountains, rocks and surrounding sea and the visual stimulation of sunrise and sunset are, of course, catalysts to these emotional outpourings and the primary source of inspiration for Diana herself.

But the dance can be done equally effectively in an urban environment — as was demonstrated in a performance last year at Cityplaza, Taikoo Shing.

Diana is eager to continue the combination of ocean and urban settings for her dances (she'll be giving a performance in March at the Arts Centre to celebrate the vernal equinox) for she sees her move away from the dream-like surroundings of the sea into those incongruous venues as part of her journey down the ladder into the reality of the world.

"I'm not just doing this dance for myself," she emphasises.

"Although it's a very personal experience and finds its inspiration from within me, it must be expressed externally in order to fulfil its role of communication, of giving people the chance to experience a healing power, the chance to find their own meaning in life."