

# Diversions



## Technology & Laurie Anderson: Home of The Bizarre By Scott Horrah

With her short, spiky hair, thin white suit, impish smirk, gaunt features and androgynous aura, performance artist Laurie Anderson hardly resembles a manifestation of technology. In her first film, "Home of the Brave," she looks more like a chic waif, vamping her way through the artsy soft underbelly like a theatrical chameleon.

But technology is Anderson's Muse, the symbol of her spirit and the victim of her poetic vitriol.

"Home of the Brave: A Film by Laurie Anderson" is the result of several days worth of concert and conceptual footage shot at the Park Theater in Union City, N.J., in July 1985. It is the culmination of the years Anderson spent experimenting with performance art and musical fusion in New York's Soho and in Great Britain.

"This movie is very much about technology," Anderson says in the film's press kit. "It's about a lot of equipment — an enormous number of machines trying to make the jump from zero to one. It's also about how people relate to technology — a lot of people trying to tame their machines, trying to keep them in line and still make something that feels human."

It is also a cinematic landmark. The Talking Heads' brilliant "Stop Making Sense" was the first film to combine concert footage with surreal, perspicacious ramblings of life and theatrical poetry in motion. David Byrne created this technology by immortalizing the visual potential of music performance with video puns and high-tech graphics.

But Anderson's opus makes "Stop Making Sense" look obsolete. Anderson, who's credited for writing, directing and visuals, creates a technological circus of video graphics, state-of-the-art electronic instruments, dramatic dances and quirky, abstract lyrical parables that seem to reveal the truth about progress, our souls and how we relate to our fast-paced society.

The songs, which are mostly from her

"Mister Heartbreak" tour, are all fervently delivered by such musical greats as David Van Tiegham, guitarist Adrian Belew and deadpan keyboardist Joy Askew, an aptly-named Brit with enough bleach-blond hair, feminine beauty and a sensual wit to rival Anderson's unisexual presence.

Throughout this 90-minute film, Anderson plays the chameleon, moving through various poetic stances that contain shades of Lily Tomlin, Dylan Thomas, Marilyn Monroe and Charlie Chaplin on a futuristic acid trip. Sound like an unlikely combination? It is, but it works beautifully.

In the beginning, Anderson dons a scary mask that conceals her facial structure and stands in front of a large screen with the numbers zero and one projected on it. She then delivers a wry talk-show monologue about the reasons why we would all rather be a number one than a zero.

Susay Hilferty's wacky costumes add to the bracing on-stage antics. Anderson and cohorts sport everything from jumpsuits, Mexican hats and go-go girl get-ups to Space Age Motown dresses that make the back-up vocalists look like the Supremes performing in a cantina on Mars.

Two of Hilferty's costumes are especially interesting. During one number, Anderson sports a "drum suit" that is hooked up to an amplifier so her knees and legs create resonant drum beats when she hits them with her hands rhythmically. In another piece, she wears a shiny metallic evening gown and long gloves as she recites an eerie poem like a modern-day Marlene Dietrich.

The camera manages to move in on all this action with a dizzying pace, capturing all the bizarre detail with a sense of colorful vertigo.

One memorable scene involves Anderson doing a frenetic tango with beat legend William S. Burroughs, everyone's favorite homosexual heroin-addict grandpa. Also engaging are Adrian Belew's hypnotic high jinks with a rubber-necked guitar that he plays

with a mallet.

This all *sounds* very abstract and artsy, but it isn't. It's all so entertaining, you tend to overlook the fact that there may be a message beneath all the jubilation. That's the real beauty of the film — it's mass appeal. For years Anderson has been considered "Underground," but in "Home of the Brave" she displays enough verve to satisfy even the most mainstream audience.

Anderson, who catapulted out of the obscure nether regions of the late-night New York art world in the early '80s with the smash British hit "O Superman," has finally found a way to please us often closed-minded Americans. Her art draws on the foundations of complex technology, but suffused in her images is a simplicity that reflects our daily life and the way we think.

This is most evident in the video images she draws on the giant stage screen in the film. While she gravitates before the audience, contorting her body as she plays her electric violin, the screen shows computerized versions of planes, birds, houses and other common folly falling to the ground like ectoplasmic snowflakes.

And when she intones lyrics like "language is a virus from outer space" and "America, home of the brave," it's evident that she is poking fun at our culture while she glorifies it simultaneously.

"Home of the Brave" has set a standard for performance films. Its glossy, engrossing technical veneer and Anderson's witty non sequiturs and energy all form a sensibility that will be difficult for artists to copy in the next few years.

"Home of the Brave: A Film by Laurie Anderson" starts tonight at the Sheldon Film Theatre and runs through Saturday with screenings at 7 and 9 p.m. and a matinee Saturday at 3 p.m. Also showing with it are "Hello Skinny" and "One Minute Movies," two marvelously bizarre shorts by The Residents.