Marianne Weems’ trilogy looks at how media and technology have changed our lives.

In 2003, just when the outsourcing of jobs was making political waves in America, the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York, known for presenting innovative works of performing arts, staged Altdadad. This large-scale multimedia piece by Marianne Weems, artistic director of The Builders Association, a New York-based experimental theater company, explored the phenomenon of international call centers where Indian operators are trained to pass off as Americans. In a stunning production characterized by a trademark cinematic technique, video images and numerous computer screens onstage, it highlighted the issues of media and technology impacting global culture. The play won an Obie...
Photographs by KEN WALCZACK

award for outstanding production, toured internationally and inspired Weems to create a successful sequel, Super Vision, which also used technology and dealt with contemporary concerns.

Now, Continuous City completes Weems’ trilogy of technology-centered works. This play was recently performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Next Wave Festival, which presents groundbreaking contemporary works, before touring nationally and internationally this summer.

The Builders’ Web site describes it as “a meditation on how contemporary experiences of location and dislocation stretch us to the maximum as our ‘networked selves’ occupy multiple locations.” Its fast-paced plot features a globe-trotting salesman who maintains virtual contact with his 11-year-old daughter as they chat via computer webcam. Her nanny, a newcomer to the family, uses technology to locate the father. “The imitation of one city that stretches everywhere; it doesn’t need a location. The father is lost in the confusion of cities, his point of connection is his daughter who is far away, at home. But it’s a failed connection,” she says.

On the other hand, the father’s boss, an Indian American played by Rizwan Mirza, refuses to encounter him in his real city. Mirza chats online with his cousin—he turns bored, lonely and sulky at having to communicate virtually with a distant father who misses her terribly. But the story is real, too. Many Americans talk to their far-away grandchildren by video-camera. And we know that this is how President Barack Obama kept in nightly touch with his young daughters as he moved from place to place, through two long years of campaigning.

Indeed, place has become a precious idea for Weems. “Continuous City grapples with the idea that we’re in a network that stretches everywhere; it doesn’t need a location. The father is lost in the confusion of cities, his point of connection is with his daughter who is far away, at home. But it’s a failed connection,” she says.

The Builders’ Association
Grandma’s on the Computer Screen

For more information:
The Builders Association
http://www.buildersassociation.org/

Grandma’s on the Computer Screen

Curry recipes

Rowan Mirza
http://www.asianonline.org/articles/0821/214KoranFallgue.shtml

It showed how we get caught up in technology as our voices and images travel across the world. For this project, Weems collaborated with motiroti, a London-based company led by Keith Khan and Ali Zaidi. These two young talents also maintain a whimsical Web site replete with recipes for curry in homage to their chosen name, motiroti, meaning fat bread.

“I saw their work in London and was taken by their optimism and charm—no one in American experimental theater does song and dance!” Weems recalls. The admiration was mutual: Khan and Zaidi said they were envious of what Weems had done in Jet Lag, which they had seen in London. Jet Lag is based on the true story of a grandmother who flew across the Atlantic more than 125 times until she suffered a heart attack and died in an Amsterdam hotel. The play was about constant motion and the compression of geography that happens through technology.

That exchange led to an intense cross-national collaboration: “We had to raise money just to see each other,” says Weems. After 18 months of trans-Atlantic back-and-forth, the threesome acquired the material for their play. “Our output is slow because my product is layered, large-scale and ambitious,” Weems explains.

Weems says she got the idea for the play from her own regular webcam conversations with her goddaughter who lives in India. “We’ve done this since Lola was born. Now she’s seven, she has learned to text message and orders, ‘Get on the computer!’ It is a connection that is better than no communication but, since the participants cannot hug or hold each other, it has its limitations and the play expresses that ambivalence.

Technology can provide the illusion of bringing us closer even while driving us further apart,” says Weems. The play’s father-daughter story is sad: the girl is bored, lonely and sulky at having to turn to her computer for connection. Identities shift, they’re borrowed and adapted as the world becomes more connected. And that is another idea that links the plays in this trilogy.

Alladeen focused on displacement by bridging three continents via technology: the play’s action shifts back and forth between New York, London and Bangalore.

Continuous City

Technology comes as part of the story-telling package because people’s lives are complicated by it, and because those are the tools we use. It’s a way of holding a mirror up to our society to express something that’s part of the contemporary moment.”