

November 30, 1993

# Hookers

By Elizabeth Zimmer

**Martha Bowers**

*On the Waterfront*

Red Hook Piers

November 6 and 7

**When Dancing** in the Streets invites you to a performance event, count on moving and being moved. Imaginative arts managers spent years assembling the permits, and the works displayed on Red Hook's piers kept audiences, as well as dancers, on their toes. From the starting point in a parking lot, we were guided by two local residents, one a fourth-generation "Hooker," telling us the history of the area and the buildings along the route. A police escort, flashers blazing, kept vehicular traffic at bay.

Provoked by the shooting death of a beloved principal in the streets of Red Hook, a harborside community where you glimpse the Statue of Liberty from the end of every block, choreographer Martha Bowers went to work in his school, P.S. 15, and in other neighborhood institutions. The fruit of her labors, in collaboration with dozens of artists (musicians and dancers, amateurs and professionals, locals and outsiders, kids and the elderly), kept bringing me to the edge of tears.

*On the Waterfront* was *arte povera*, made of the simplest materials, using the heroic scale and architecture of the empty industrial spaces to shelter visions of the past and to articulate the present. A bunch of lively kids chanted

and moved inside an embryonic trolley museum. A strolling band of musicians led by composer David Pleasant picked up members as the group ambulated down the pier, sounding for all the world like the New Orleans funeral bands that are the roots of jazz. A bunch of African American women sang and read to us, recalling the changes they'd witnessed over their decades in the area.

In one cavelike space, stevedores in work clothes slapped their boots and bodies in a shake-out-the-kinks dance, tossed bundles into a net that was hauled up into the rafters, and watched Hank Smith tap out a solo with a very '40s feel. In yet another building, a smoke machine tried for atmosphere, and three couples danced a slow lindy, fixing the place in what may have been its prime. John Gromada's sound score gave us water, foghorns, screeching wheels; a few actual gulls wheeled in the rafters. The dancers' tension built into a rumble; they flung rocks at the big double doors on the back walls; the doors swung open and the children rushed in, pleading in rap rhythms for an end to the rage.