

It's a fact, there's no daydreaming for impresario Elizabeth Freeman

'Art of Spectacle' is Some Serious Business for her

By Hunter Drohojowska

James Thurber's short story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" concerns a daydreamer who fantasizes about heroic adventures that become more real to him than reality. The story was so popular in the 1940s, that "Mitty" became synonymous with the word "daydream."

That story was optioned and written as a film by Everett Freeman. It was a hit in spite of Sam Goldwyn's initial query, "Who would want to see a movie about a daydreamer?"

Freeman's daughter Elizabeth turns out to be a doer and *not* a dreamer. She has done her best to live the antithesis of Mitty's life, and made a career of actively turning her fantasies into fact.

Freeman, 35, is possibly best known in Los Angeles as the editor, promoter and advertising manager of WET, the defunct magazine of "gourmet bathing and beyond." This unconventional publication, founded by Leonard Koren, commanded the attention of an international cult audience between 1976 and 1981. With the magazine's demise, Freeman's offbeat, innovative sensibility, which gave WET such spunk, has had to find other outlets, most recently "The Art of Spectacle," a festival of performance art. The series, now in progress around the city through December, is modeled on the Brooklyn Academy of Music's prestigious Next Wave series, presenting a series of avant-garde-and-beyond performers to a burgeoning audience for the nether-world gulf that exists between art, theater and music.

French critic Guy Debord in his book, "The Society of the Spectacle," wrote, "All of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. ... Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation." Freeman selected such diverse musicians, dancers and artists as Glenn Branca,

Lyn Hixson, Ping Chong, Robert Longo, Remy Charlip, Carl Stone and Rachel Rosenthal to create what amounts to a continuing illustration of Debord's thesis. The series is being sponsored by Some Serious Business, a non-profit arts group co-founded by Freeman and Nancy Drew, along with UCLA and L.A. Contemporary Exhibitions.

Freeman thought that the project would meet favorable response following euphoria of the Olympic Arts Festival when discussions of a biennial festival were rampant. But she found that people were initially slow to respond.

"Drumming up anywhere near the excitement that surrounded the Olympic Arts Festival was difficult," Freeman says. "It was interesting to try and create that impact and find how far you fall short not being Robert Fitzpatrick (director of the Olympic Arts Festival) or the Olympics. What's presented here is not that much different from the avant-garde theater of that festival. It's really the fact that it hasn't been validated, yet."

As Fitzpatrick will be the first to tell you, organizing any festival is a Herculean labor. But Freeman raised all of the money for Spectacles through grants and private sources. How? She takes tips from "The Blues Brothers," claiming she's on a "mission from God," and she doesn't take no for an answer. She selected her advertisers for the catalog based on the appropriate style of their graphics. Freeman also designed the unusual volume — a tall, skinny spiral-bound book with a splashy cover in black, purple and yellow. Iconoclastic Q-and-A interviews with the artists are fashioned after celebrity pulp magazines — each artist is asked about his or her favorite films, books, recordings, idols, songs, places, periodicals, colors, images and fast food; each is also asked to compose his or her own epitaph.

Freeman, whose mother was an actress and model, is a striking woman with flashing sage eyes, freckles, a long intelligent face and hair streaked with a thousand shades of brilliant red, bronze, gold and honey, cascading to her hips. She laughs infectiously, naturally, and simply cannot resist the im-

pulse to clown around. Talking about her yoga class, she segues into fable of typically black humor: "My friend was doing yoga in a head stand position when she slipped and broke her neck. She's an older woman, alone, wondering how she could get help when the phone rings. It's an obscene phone call! The more she pleads for help, the more excited this guy gets." She laughs and continues, "I've been telling everyone this story because I think it's so wild. Then, the other morning, first thing, I was depressed and wondering about 'Spectacle.' What I am doing? Why am I doing it? When am I ever going to grow up? The phone rings. It's an obscene phone call! I think this is so funny I keep telling the guy, 'C'mon, you can do better than that!' Until he hangs up on me!" More laughter.

It is the absurdity, incongruity and irony of life that keeps Freeman going. The search for humor, for the unexpected, is her major motivation.

Freeman lives with the unexpected: Spot, a pet chicken, and Puccini, a German shepard, one happy family in a wooden bungalow near the mouth of the Pacific Palisades. The house is as fresh and unconventional as she: The living room is white but the beams spanning the peaked ceilings are painted a deep aqua. Comfortable wicker furniture is pulled around a massive natural stone fireplace. Sunlight streams in uncurtained windows in the kitchen where she pours strong coffee into bright colored mugs. "You know that Randy Newman song, 'My life is good?' I feel that way ... my life is goooooood."

Since graduating in fine art and design from UCLA in 1972, Freeman has been involved in a number of unconventional enterprises: textile artist; editor/art director of Environmental Communications, a resource catalog of slides, videos and films on art, architecture and environments around the world; architect's representative; scout for House and Garden; architectural designer of Tripod, a preschool for deaf children. Most recently she raised the money to redesign the Venice Family Planning Clinic, a



Mike Mullen/Herald photographer

Elizabeth Freeman, in the living room of her home near the Pacific Palisades, jokes that she's "the hardest working girl in no business." Currently she's responsible for helping organize "The Art of Spectacle."

non-profit center. "I thought if the place were fixed up, the people who go there, who are generally lower income and minorities, it would give them a better sense of self to think that the place they are going looks as good as the service they are getting. Now it looks terrific." To Freeman, there is no conflict in simultaneously working in art and charity. "All those things fall together, yet the thing I joke about the most is that I'm the hardest working girl in no business."

Today, she agrees to be called a "producer." "In my constant search for a job description that's the one that fits the most. Once you have an idea, the 100 million details that need to be accomplished are what a producer does."

Her interest in production actually began in the late-1970s when *Some Serious Business* was the first organization to bring Philip Glass to L.A., and the only one to ever present Robert Wilson. "Our motto was, 'No obstacle too small,' " she remembers. "SSB had no money, no office, no nothing, yet we put on 60 events in three years."

Freeman achieves what others

only talk about, whether it is starting a magazine or coordinating a festival. "It takes a vision," she explained thoughtfully. "And mindless enthusiasm. You have to really be turned on and love what you're doing."

Recently, an acquaintance openly wondered why Freeman should be so driven, especially in the service of others, rather than herself. Even at Marymount High School, she helped start a tutoring society, was active in forensics club, senior class president and prom princess. Is it a form of overcompensation? "It came from being an eldest child. (She has a brother and sister.) And holding a vision that things were OK when everything was falling apart." Her parents divorced when she was a teen-ager and she created her own world — *a Mitty*. The drive and focus carried on to adult life.

"Maybe I have a fear. I'm still shy. When I first started to hustle things at UCLA, I used to be afraid to call people on the telephone. I would call information for numbers. I knew just so I could have positive feedback on the telephone. I was

trying to overcome a deep-seated anxiety and self-doubt." Out of that she learned not to accept failure, and not to compromise.

"You don't know that you can't succeed. With that given, you just figure out how to accomplish things. And you don't give up. You don't want to compromise. You don't want to take the easy way out. In relationships, in work, whatever."

In the future, Freeman wants to channel her energies inward. She is writing a screenplay with her father and wants to concentrate on her own work. She lives alone, has "friends." Marriage doesn't seem to be imminent and she doesn't seem to mind.

"Accepting role models that are more traditional would be easier and therefore less frightening," she says. "But there are no role models for what I want. The world is so much more interesting the minute you allow for infinite possibilities. The whole notion of not having role models, however, means you're winging it. It's sort of like surfing. To stay up there, you've got to have loose knees to keep your balance."