Navigating Screendance Curation: An interview with Shawn Bible on the evolution of the Dance On Camera Festival and Screendance

Davide De Lillis

In this interview, Shawn Bible shares his professional journey and his entry into the *Dance on Camera festival*. He delves into the festival's curatorial process and the educational initiatives promoted by Dance on Camera to support emerging talent. Drawing from his experience as a curator, professor, educational director, and artist, he highlights the growing role of storytelling in contemporary screendance and reflects on the impact of new technologies on the field.

This text is based on a conversation between Davide De Lillis and Shawn Bible that took place on Google Meet on 11 February 2025. While efforts have been made to stay true to the transcript and preserve the conversational tone, some parts have been summarized for clarity and conciseness. This version has been reviewed by both Shawn and Davide.

Davide De Lillis: Let's start from your arrival at Dance On Camera [DOC].[1] How did you start your collaboration with them?

Shawn Bible: Marta Renzi is why I joined DOC.[2] Well, it's a weird story! I was a fine artist. I ended up dancing for a dance company, while I was a designer for a bunch of clothing brands here in the States. Then I went to graduate school, having received a full scholarship. As soon as I graduated from graduate school at the University of Michigan, I was offered my first job as a professor of dance. At the beginning I thought - Oh my God! I am a technology person: I have been designing on Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, InDesign and using Premiere Pro, all this software! Then, I started to incorporate it into what I did with dance: making films with dance. And later, I found out that there was this thing called the Dance on Camera Festival.

DDL: Do you remember in which year you discovered the DOC festival?

SB: Probably in 2003—way back in the early 2000s. And I had no idea this was even a thing. Because, back then, I was living in the Midwest, in Michigan.
Then, I created a relationship with Dance on Camera. As the head of the dance department, I would buy films from DOC and host a festival at the university I taught at. It would be called the Dance on Camera Touring Festival.[3] Over those ten years, while teaching at various universities before moving to New York, I continued buying the DOC films and hosting a festival at every university I worked at.
Once I moved to New York, Marta Renzi, then president of DOC, told me "Now that you live here, you can participate on our board and see how this really works." That's how I joined the board. Marta left soon after. I stepped in as vice president drawing on my experience with dance on camera as a filmmaker, professor and curator of my touring festival for ten years.
I became the liaison between DOC and the academic system. In the US there is often a big

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divide between professional organizations and academia. So, I thought - Why don't we create an easier way for academics to learn about dance on camera? Why don't we invite students to show their works on a DOC student program? So, as both a professor and a DOC board member, I would be sent to various schools around New York to help teach young people how to make dance films. I was the education director for about five years. Then, when the president of DOC moved to Washington State, I stepped into the role. It was kind of accidental.

DDL: You started curating screendance festivals in the early 2000s. How do you think screendance has changed since then?

SB: Most of the dance on camera films I would call shorts, because they are usually under thirty minutes. However, as dance on camera evolves they get longer and longer. I think they will eventually reach the standard length of feature films, around one hour and a half. Eighty minutes is usually the timeframe for a film to be considered a feature. Many dance on camera documentaries are already within that range.
The storytelling is also developing. For the DOC Festival, I look for films that are balanced. If it's a narrative film, for example, I look for a story with a clear beginning and resolution, that does not leave everything ambiguous. I think this is one of the biggest changes I've seen in dance films over the years—the storytelling has become much stronger.

DDL: One of my research interests explores the relationship between screendance and the environment.[4] As Sylvie Vitaglione observes in *Dancing in Place: Site-specific Screendance* (2018), many artists have created works outside traditional studio settings, often engaging with *natural materials*. Is this still the case today? How has this trend evolved over the years?

SB: In the beginning there used to be all of these films where people were dancing outside in nature. To me that is one of the most humanistic organic ways of approaching dance film. Because we are products of nature. That's who we are. It's in our bones. I think it's a very natural process for dancers to go outside and see in what interesting ways we can interact with nature. You know, trees, grass, dirt, water.
What has changed over time is the relevance of questions like: Why are you outside? Why are you dancing with trees? Why are you dancing in the water? Why are you dancing in this big pool of mud? It's not enough to just be doing it. We have to evolve the form of dance film to start making meaningful connections to the narrative.
When I started, films were very artistic, very avant-garde. They pushed a lot of boundaries in terms of what a narrative is. And I loved that! Now I see films about people in nature with a complete narrative and a story. And you learn something from the film. I obviously don't mean to say that people don't make non-narrative and abstract films anymore. Of course they still do. But the biggest percentage of films nowadays - that I have seen and that are submitted from all over the world - have a general theme running through them. People in nature are actually achieving something. Whether it is a piece about climate change or about not being able to breathe the air, a statement on marine life, there is some educational component that is embedded with those films, which is how things have shifted.

Films often have a statement. Whether political or not, there is some kind of statement in the work. Filmmakers are not doing it just because it's pretty. And that's what I love. Because there is a strength to films that leave you with something to think about. I love things that are really beautiful, but I also want to know why you made it. For example, last year we programmed a dance film from Taiwan called *Sea Spray* (directed by Chin-Yuan Ke). They filmed some of their dances in flooded areas, and it was incredibly poetic. Most of it was in black and white. It was one of the first times I had seen a feature dance film addressing environmental issues in a certain region of the world.

DDL: Have you ever created a DOC Festival category specifically dedicated to works related to the environment?

SB: Yes. One of our last year's programs was called *Environmental Expressions.*[5] It included films related to nature in various ways. There was a film called *Branché* , from Canada, which followed a circus troupe performing in a forest. Their acts offered a very interesting perspective on how to work with nature. It was incredibly beautiful.
There was another film we featured in 2023 called *Ghostly Labor: A Dance Film*. It was about the Mexican migrant community and the exploitative conditions they faced on farms in California. So, yes. We have definitely done that. I remember in 2023 we also showed *Living on The Threshold* , a really great film from France, shot in Réunion Island. The dancer goes underwater several times to encounter migrating whales and dance with them.

DDL: How does your curatorial process usually unfold? How do thematic categories influence your choices? What challenges might arise along the way?

SB: Curating is probably my favorite part of being involved in the DOC festival. I love to watch the 300 to 500 films that are submitted every year. I'll watch them and think - Okay, was that interesting in a way I haven't seen before? Is it balanced from beginning to end? Is the camera too shaky?
You know, if someone's camera is too shaky and they did a handheld, we can't show that on a big screen at Lincoln Center or Symphony Space, because it will make people nauseous.[6] So, I have to eliminate certain films just because of their technical issues. They may have errors in the editing, no credits or they didn't have copyright to music. Some have audio issues that would blow the speakers in our presenting facilities.
After this first selection, I narrow down the remaining films to the absolute strongest in terms of my opinion. All I look at is the film for what it is. I don't try to program them into any categories. I'm just looking for the best films in the submissions. Only after I picked those films, I put them into categories. I check how many films I have that are about the environment. How many documentaries about famous dance figures. How many films about political issues happening in the world.

From those categories, I remove the weaker films and I see which ones go together. And it's not because they look alike, it's films that strongly contrast each other. I don't want any of the films to be alike. If we're doing a short program of 10 films, I don't want to show a bunch of films in nature in a row, because people are just going to be desensitized to the environment. So I don't do that. The same for similar music: a lot of dance people use music

in their films. If music is similar from one film to the next, I will not program them next to each other.

DDL: Does the experience or popularity of a filmmaker play a role in your selection choices?

SB*:* I will appreciate a brand new filmmaker just as much as someone who isn't. You know, last year we featured a film called *Violent Textures of Nature and Flesh,* directed by Matthew Strassburger. It was bizarre: slow-motion, drony music, people laying around in nature. They're just laying in the grass and it's dark and creepy. To me, it was one of the most brilliant uses of the outdoors in a long time. A fresh-out-of-college filmmaker made this beautiful film, and it was one of my favorites this past year. So, I strongly believe in new talent and new voices. And I think dance on camera is a beautiful thing, because a lot of the younger filmmakers who are coming up in this industry have really strong editing skills. They can do all sorts of incredible things with computers.

DDL: This year, you've co-curated the festival with Cara Hagan and Michael Trusnovec.[7] How has the collaborative curatorial process unfolded? Has DOC typically been co-curated by a team in the past?

DOC has always invited a curatorial team of dance film professionals that are hand-selected by the board and executive director. A team of diverse perspectives is assembled, usually three curators who watch all of the submissions, create ratings, and then come together to compare their lists of films. From our collective lists we whittle down into a smaller list. From our small list we begin to think about how these films can create programs. We'll often pull films back in and take films out, depending on the diversity of our films and what we want to program. Every year I can say we have to leave out so many great films that we can't find a place for in our final program. That is indicative of the level of talent around the world. We honor and respect each other's opinions and perspectives and have a great time deciding which films will make it to the festival.

DDL: Does the DOC festival rely solely on submissions, or do you also invite some artists?

SB: Well, I think because Dance on Camera is 53 years old, people know it. Anyone in the entire world can submit a film to Dance on Camera. We don't reach out to filmmakers who we love. I know a lot of dance filmmakers, because I see many submissions every year. So, I have a relationship with their history and the body of their work. But I don't think that reaching out to them would be a fair process. Filmfreeway is the number one contact for anyone who wants to submit films. If you can put your advertisement on Filmfreeway under the dance film category, you'll get submissions. So, when we open for submissions, we just try to get the word out as best as we can. We mainly use social media and Filmfreeway.

DDL: Why does DOC ask for a submission fee?

SB*:* So, because we're a non-profit organization, a submission fee is essential. It covers administrative costs for processing applications and assisting filmmakers with any technical issues related to their submission files. We have to pay FilmFreeway and our executive director to put out the calls. We pay a rental fee for our venues. Most of the grants that we receive can't pay for these things. They are mainly focused on educational programs, and we

are not making money for ourselves.

DDL: Does DOC waive the submission fee in some cases?

SB: There are some cases where we actually do that. We used to do it more often, but we realized that it led to financial losses, so it hasn't happened in many years. We try to keep our submission fee as low as we can. We start with our early bird submission, which is the cheapest—I think it's $50. If you wait to submit your work, the fee increases. Unfortunately, we can't change that. I am a choreographer of a dance company, and I know that, in some cases, artists may not have the money to apply. It's a sensitive topic, but that is the only way for us to run a festival at a prestigious venue like Lincoln Center or Symphony Space, and to offer that kind of visibility to the artists.

DDL: Aside from the screening days of the festival, in what other ways does DOC contribute to the Screendance scene? You mentioned you have educational programs. Do you organize workshops for artists? Or other public educational events?

SB: Yes! These are the activities that most of the grants help fund. We do educational programming where we rent a studio and invite filmmakers who want to receive feedback on their work. I curate these *Dance Film Labs*, so I review the submissions. The selected artists are invited for a discussion with a panel of experienced filmmakers who provide feedback, helping them understand how an audience beyond their peer group would receive it. It's really rewarding and we do several of those every year.
We offer a *Production Grant* program, providing funding to filmmakers. Submissions are usually once a year. The grants go from $2,500 and below. It doesn't sound like a lot of money, but it could cover the cost of an editor or somebody to color your film or a sound engineer if you need it. A panel of curators reviews the films and assigns three production grants. One of these works is usually shown at the DOC Festival, during the *Production Grantee Program*. In which the artist shares insights about the filmmaking process and has an open discussion with the audience.

We also have the *Dance in Focus Award*. Once a year, we honor an outstanding dance figure from around the world with this award, and they usually present a film. This year we honored Carmen de Lavallade.[8]

We also offer *#mydancefilm*, a social media short film submission program. Anyone in the world can send in their work. All they have to do is upload their work on instagram, using #mydancefilm. It can be any kind of dance film under three minutes. We get hundreds of those submissions every year.[9]

DDL - How has the festival changed since you joined DOC? And looking ahead, how do you think it will continue to change, particularly in response to technological advancements or developments in other fields?

SB*:* Well, the festival is going to evolve as people evolve. As I mentioned, narratives are a lot

stronger. The films themselves are getting a lot stronger, because artists are getting more professional and more adept at making films. So, the quality is just getting better and better. Artistry is getting pretty cool because technology is evolving and, for example, we can do more things with computers and drones. Drone footage to me is one of the most exciting things that has happened to dance on camera. We have a film this year in the festival called *Foreshore,* directed by Audrey MacLean. It has a lot of drone footage over a beach and it is the most beautiful landscape you have seen. I mean it is just incredible.
Also, there's a film series you should check out—it's called *Future Futures*, directed by Brian Johnson. It was a television show, I think for CBC, blending dance and film. As people move through space, they begin to glitch, creating incredible effects. The work is a commentary on technology's limitations and the episodes are amazing.
Going back to your question, I'm waiting for films with AI generated people to appear in our submissions, because I know it's coming.

DDL: You haven't received any AI-generated film submissions yet?

SB: We've had AI-enhanced footage, like computerized voices interacting with people and making them do things. We've never had a fully AI-generated film with human-like figures. We've seen animation artists make cartoons and game designers make dance films using game design. But when I say AI-generated films, I mean works where the body is no longer limited - It can stretch, transform into a rubber band, or morph into different characters. That is what I'm looking forward to. I like things that are manipulated by technology. And I'm excited to see how people use AI with dancefilm to strengthen their creative process. I know it's not for everyone. But I'm very curious. In academia in the U.S., we're trying to prevent people from cheating by using AI to generate their papers. So, I'm just very curious to see how it trickles into the dance film world.

DDL: Have you received applications by artists who work with dance in virtual reality?

Yes! We had a filmmaker. Actually, he is the director of *Future Futures*. He made a film with sensor driven virtual reality. But it requires a specific setup and that's not something we can do. Two screens that face each other and you stand in the middle wearing the goggles and things happen around you. A software developer is also involved in the process. But we can't really do installations.

DDL: Are installations something that DOC festival would want to present in the future?

SB: If we wanted to do something like that, there would be a cost, so it's always a balance of what we want to prioritize. Right now, the focus of DOC isn't on installations but on showcasing dance on screen in a traditional cinema setting.
I'd love to present something like that as the opening – where the DOC festival is happening in the theater, but with a dance-on-camera installation piece in the lobby before you enter. That's the kind of thing I'd enjoy doing.

Biographies:

Shawn T. Bible grew up in Roseville, Michigan, and earned a BA in *Social Science and Dance* from Michigan State University, followed by an MFA in *Dance Choreography and Performance* from the University of Michigan. He currently serves as the President of *Dance on Camera* and Executive Producer of the *Dance on Camera Festival*. Additionally, Shawn moderates the *Dance Film Labs*, providing education to dance filmmakers, and hosts filmmaker Q&A panels during the festival.
Shawn has been a Professor of Dance at Idaho State University, Texas Tech University, and Grand Valley State University (where he served as Head of Dance). He joined the faculty at Manhattanville College in 2016 as the Director of Dance.
As the artistic director of *shawnbibledanceco.*, a contemporary dance company he founded in 2007, Shawn's work is presented internationally.

Davide De Lillis holds a Master's degree in *Choreographing Live Art* from the University of Lincoln (UK) and is currently a PhD student in *Culture, Practices, and Technologies of Cinema, Media, Music, Theatre, and Dance* at the University of Roma Tre (Italy). He curates the streaming program *Screendance@VisualcontainerTV*, and his work as a screendance artist has been showcased internationally.

Notes:

[1] Dance on Camera is the longest-running dance film festival in the world. It happens every year in New York City (U.S.). See https://www.dancefilms.org/.

[2] Marta Renzi is a choreographer and filmmaker. Her work has been showcased internationally and has earned numerous awards. She served as a board member and President of the Dance Films Association, which organizes the Dance on Camera Festival. See https://martarenzi.blogspot.com/.

[3] See https://dfasite.wordpress.com/festival/dance-on-camera-on-tour/.

[4] This interview is part of the research for the joint PhD program between Roma Tre University and the National Academy of Dance in *Cultures, Practices, and Technologies of Cinema, Media, Music, Theater, and Dance*, funded by PNRR funds, Ministerial Decree No. 629/2024.

[5] See https://www.filmlinc.org/films/environmental-expressions/.

[6] From 1996 to 2024 the Dance on Camera festival was co-presented with and took place at Film at Lincoln Center. In 2025 the festival is in partnership with the Symphony Space, where it takes place. See https://www.dancefilms.org/.

[7] Cara Hagan is a multidisciplinary artist, writer, and curator. Hagan serves on the board of Dance On Camera as secretary and co-curates the festival. See https://www.carahagan.net/. Michael Trusnovec is a celebrated dancer and curator. He served on the board of Dance On Camera as vice president and co-curates the festival. See

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHmCXCNkEtE.

[8] Carmen de Lavallade (1931-2025) was a choreographer and dancer, born in Los Angeles. She performed in Broadway productions, with Alvin Ailey's company, and at the Metropolitan Opera. She received numerous prestigious awards in recognition of her contribution to dance and the performing arts. See https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/carmen-de-lavallade.

[9] For more details on the activities of Dance On Camera see https://www.dancefilms.org/dance-film-labs; https://www.dancefilms.org/production-grants and https://www.instagram.com/explore/search/keyword/?q=%23mydancefilm.

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