

# **Moving Pictures: A Moment in Time**

## **The Rise and Untimely End of Canada's First Dancefilm Festival**

By Kathleen Smith

### **Abstract**

This memoir by co-founder Kathleen Smith offers a brief history of the Moving Pictures Festival of Dance on Film and Video, a screendance event and touring program that took place annually in Toronto from 1992 through 2006. Though ground-breaking in its interdisciplinary approach and popular with both audiences and artists, the pressures of unstable funding, changing urban landscapes and a labour-intensive format ultimately made the festival unsustainable. This essay chronicles the highs and lows of festival development in the dancescreen sector at a crucial moment in time.

### **Moving Pictures: A Moment in Time**

The Moving Pictures Festival of Dance on Film and Video ran annually in Toronto between 1992 and 2006. It was never supposed to be a festival. It began as a one-off event, instigated by Marc Glassman, a Toronto renaissance man of the arts who was programming films for the National Film Board (NFB) at the time, and me, a journalist writing about arts and culture, mostly dance. Marc and I ran in the same social circles in a town where friendly connections matter greatly if you're trying to support and animate local cultural activity.

### **Inception**

In the 90s, Queen Street West was the city's cultural frontier. A wild mix of mostly humble clubs, shops, galleries and restaurants, the street running roughly from University Avenue to Bathurst Street was ground zero for Toronto artists and filmmakers. Here, rents and rehearsal spaces were cheap and plentiful leading to a small but vibrant arts community. It was very concentrated (some might say exclusive); everyone seemed to know everyone else, regardless of the disciplines they worked in. On this strip, Marc was involved with the NFB John Spotton Cinema, his own Pages Bookstore and the Rivoli restaurant and nightclub run by mutual friend Andre Rosenbaum. It made sense to program early Moving Pictures events into these familiar spaces.

We recruited projectionist Hans Burgschmidt from the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF). He would set the festival's technical standards high, teaching us all about formats and the nuances of resolution and keystoneing. We also worked with multi-media artist Laurie-Shawn Borzovoy on a custom projection platform for the Rivoli club space.

That first year, we looked mostly to Europe and the UK for programming, following bright lights from the live performance scene who were delving into film and video. We discovered London filmmaker David Hinton and brought over his *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men*, an important full-length work made with the UK's DV8 Physical Theatre. We looked to BBC's Dance for Camera series, PBS' Alive-TV in the States and distributors that specialised in performance on film and TV, such as Argos in Belgium and RM Associates in the UK, as well as Canada's own NFB and Cinema Libre. Through the Film Board, Marc discovered



*Evelyn Hart: Moment of Light*, a documentary about the luminous Canadian ballerina directed by John Reeve.

On July 8, 1992 we launched a joyful 4-day community gathering powered by family and friends, a brash mix of live performance, super8 and 16 mm film and video. Audiences filled our tiny cinema spaces, and they were boisterous and engaged; local newspapers wrote about us. At our closing party, dancer friends improvised into the wee hours. Magic.



Party polaroids by Gregory Nixon; l to r: Hans Burgschmidt, Marc Glassman with Vanessa Harwood and Linda Maybarduk, Veronica Tennant

### **Early Years 1993-1999**

Flushed with the success of the initial event, we impulsively decided to launch an annual festival. Funders seemed enthusiastic, filmmakers were over the moon – buoyed by all the good vibes, we had no idea what we were getting into.

For the second festival in 1993, we initiated thematic programs. That year we became friends with American filmmaker Elliot Caplan, then-videographer for the Merce Cunningham Company and Foundation. We programmed Caplan's stunning black and white *Beach Birds for Camera* (1993), building a program of related modernist classics around it: Dave Wilson and Martha Graham's *Seraphic Dialogue*, made for the Bell Telephone Hour on NBC in 1971; Ed Emschwiler and Alwin Nikolais' *Totem* (1963) and *Merce By Merce By Paik* (1978) made by Merce Cunningham, Charles Atlas and Nam June Paik. Caplan came to town for the screening. My memory that he set fire to his hotel room trying to prepare a kosher snack may be unreliable, but he definitely taught a camera workshop and won our hearts with his quirks and expertise.

In the earliest days, the festival was supported with small project grants from the Toronto Arts Council (TAC) and the Ontario Arts Council (OAC), modest sums of cash that acknowledged the hybrid nature of the festival by splitting funding responsibilities between dance and media arts divisions. There was also a significant amount of in-kind donation and sponsorship from the immediate community. For example, the Rivoli offered us space for free and even threw in snacks, refreshments and drink tickets for audiences and crew. Many distributors waived or lowered rental fees, and films arrived from France via diplomatic pouch courtesy of the French Consulate in Toronto. Well-connected friends volunteered or kicked in goods and services in the spirit of getting Moving Pictures off the ground. It's

unlikely we could have built what we did without this kind of help and support, which continued throughout our 15-year run.

Later, the Canada Council for the Arts, several private foundations, the Department of Canadian Heritage, and the Ontario Film Development Corporation contributed regular operating and project funding. We began to charge a modest submission fee for those who could afford it, as well as charging admission to screenings (alongside numerous complimentary entries, of course). Each year after the first two, our budget was a mix of revenue from government and foundation grants, in-kind donations, fundraising events, box office and entry fees. Marc and I took honorariums at the beginning and we hired various people on short-term contracts for festival production. Towards the end of our run I took a salary (Marc never took one) and our part-time festival administrator Jennifer Watkins managed touring activities and served as a programming assistant. Moving Pictures remained mightily understaffed for its entire life, especially considering that our programming activities never stopped expanding. Thankfully, finding volunteers to help out was never a problem: Toronto residents have made the city an enthusiastic centre for cinema, independent and otherwise, and we absolutely benefitted from that in so many ways. The dance community in Toronto is similarly philanthropic with their time and energy – choreographers and dance artists pitched in too.

Modelling local film festivals we were already involved with as founders, board members, writers and reviewers – notably TIFF, the Images Festival of Independent Film and Video and Hot Docs – we branched out in 1993 with a few ancillary activities. We introduced panel discussions, presented a video installation called *Isadora Speaks* by Elizabeth Chitty and held a special presentation of Ron Mann's documentary *Twist*. Looking back, the ambition seems breathtaking. But, internationally at least, the material was available to go even bigger. As curators, we also began to follow our individual interests. Marc's pet program in 1993 was *Psych(o)delia: The Kinetic Factor*, a series of avant garde films from artists like Stan Brakhage and Norman McLaren, all inspired and informed by dance and movement. My special project involved shorter works by British filmmaker Peter Greenaway, including *Rosa*, choreographed by Anne-Teresa de Keersmaecker, and *Not Mozart*, made with dancer/choreographer Ben Craft.

In the months preceding this edition of the festival we had sent out a national call for submissions that also yielded material. Word of mouth resulted in local filmmakers such as Gariné Torossian dropping preview tapes into my home mailbox (we programmed her early experimental 16mm work *Platform*). Eventually, Canadian independent work would come to dominate the programming.

In 1994, we moved the festival from July to October, mostly to better align with arts council funding cycles and to uphold the idea that serious arts festivals could not happen in the summer months in Toronto. We opened this edition with Montreal filmmaker Bernar Hebert's lush *Velazquez's Little Museum* featuring LaLaLa Human Steps. In a special presentation, we premiered *The Burning Skin*, directed by Srinivas Krishna and choreographed by Roger Sinha. And we inaugurated a festival tradition with the Canada Dances screening: all-new films and videos culled from the annual call for submissions. We also introduced our audiences to expat film artist Alison Murray, born in Nova Scotia, resident in the UK, with a retrospective program of her gritty avant garde short films, including *Kissy Suzuki Suck* and *Wank Stallions*.

In 1995, Murray came over for the festival to teach a workshop in person and show a new short called *Sleazeburger* as part of a program devoted to UK artists like Margaret Williams, Deborah May and Sarah Blunt.

That year we added another theatre to our roster, the 200-seat Jackman Hall at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Here we opened the festival with a black and white double bill – Laura Taler’s *the village trilogy* and Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker’s *Achterland*. Film prints both, one 16 mm and one 35mm – this was the kind of screening that solidified our commitment to film as a presentation medium, even as the landscape was beginning to shift in favour of video and digital technologies. There would be fewer and fewer film prints to screen as time went on, but we always gave them the utmost care and attention when they showed up in cans at the projection booth door.



Photo of Laura Taler in the *village trilogy* by Stacy Clark. The film won the inaugural Cinedance Award in 1995.

Working with film at the Jackman also required us to be supervised by the Ontario Film Review Board (formerly the Ontario Censor Board). Thanks to years-long pushback from the Toronto’s film festival community, we were able to post a blanket statement limiting audiences to over-18s rather than physically submitting individual films for Board approval. Still, I remember one dance artist who arrived at a screening with his new born baby in his arms – ushers were forced to deny him entry. This really wasn’t our style at all – but provincial oversight was just part of being a film festival in Ontario in the early 90s. Eventually, most artist-run organisations and independent festivals stopped paying attention or bothering with compliance, with few repercussions.

Other films shown that year included *Dido and Aeneas* by Mark Morris and Barbara Willis Sweete (not technically a film, but shot on film with what could be considered a feature film

budget by Canadian standards) and *The Last Supper*, Cynthia Roberts' 16mm adaptation of the remarkable Hillar Liitoja play about a choreographer ending his life. With minimal movement and only allusive references to dance, *The Last Supper* wandered around the extreme end of Moving Pictures' total-seconds-of-dance criteria (we had somehow settled on three seconds). Back then we tried to push the boundaries of what could be considered dance film as far as they could go, mostly because Marc and I were both cultural omnivores ourselves and formal hybrids were interesting to us.

Another important innovation in 1995 was setting up the inaugural Cinedance Award for the festival film that most successfully combined choreography with camerawork. The prize was a \$10,000 package of film goods and services, all of it donated by Toronto's well-established and generous film production community. Filmmaker Atom Egoyan, former ballerina Veronica Tennant and video director Curtis Wehrfritz made up the jury. Later, with a cash donation by dance and opera journalist Paula Citron, we added the Citron Award for Best Choreography for Camera. Still later, the competitive program *The Pitch* was introduced. A staple at larger film festivals, pitch sessions gather funders and distributors to hear filmmakers pitch new projects in person, offering feedback and awarding the most promising with a prize package of film production services to get it made.

Managing the awards jury each year became a focus for Marc – he would host boozy restaurant dinners overflowing with animated conversations about art. Wrangling sponsorships and prize money was a year-round effort for our tiny team and we were always astonished by the goodwill and generosity our little festival seemed to generate. A matinee screening of the award winners, alongside curator and audience favourites, became a much-loved tradition on the final day of each festival.

At the 5th edition of the festival in 1996 we showed a diverse group of new Canadian films: *No Guilt/Non coupable*, John Faichney's half hour documentary about dancer Susan MacPherson passing on a solo by Paul-André Fortier to Peggy Baker; the breathtaking three-minute short *Nomad* by dancer Philip Drube and filmmaker Sarah Willinsky, and works by Alejandro Ronceria and Nick de Pencier. International content included Deborah May's *Plane Song*, set in Namibia, and Mike Figgis' riveting *Just Dancing Around?* a bio-pic of sorts featuring William Forsythe and his Frankfurt-based ballet company. We closed the festival with a screening of Clara van Gool's *Enter Achilles*, choreographed by DV8's Lloyd Newson (who quietly attended the screening we found out later).

Great films all, but 1996 was even more notable as the year we started our touring program. *Moving Pictures on the Road* packaged selections from the main festival to tour the country during the winter months. Artists were paid additional screening fees (very small in the beginning) and sometimes went along to represent their work and engage with regional artists and audiences. Initially we teamed up with colleagues of Marc's, presenters with a long-standing interest in Canadian independent filmmaking and the arts: Jim Sinclair at the Pacific Cinematheque in Vancouver, Dave Barber at The Cinematheque in Winnipeg and Tom McSorley at the Canadian Film Institute in Ottawa. One of the main reasons for Moving Pictures' ongoing success I believe was the strength of our relationships with established film presenters, distributors and production organisations. We partnered with lots of dance organisations also, but it was the cinematheque system at home and internationally that really understood what we were trying to do, offering support for touring films and artists and drumming up regional audiences curious about this new hybrid of choreography and

camerawork. The touring program eventually became a separate revenue stream as it allowed us access to different types of arts funding at national and regional levels.

In 1997, we opened the festival with a documentary, the Academy Award-nominated *Suzanne Farrell: Elusive Muse* at Jackman Hall. Moving Pictures had always made room for docs, as a preference of the curators, but also for the incredible value that archival footage of dance holds for the community. Farrell attended the screening and spoke of her legendary relationship with George Balanchine while fans in the audience showered her with flowers. Another full-length documentary we showed that year, Efin Reznikov's *Terpsichore's Captives*, revealed the flip side of ballet glory with its stern examination of the classical Russian training system. More experimental offerings built around documentary content included Laura Taler's *Heartland*, Nick de Pencier's *The Road to Halifax*, and Dennis Day's short film *Heaven or Montreal*. That year we also showed *Men* by Margaret Williams and Victoria Marks, shot in Banff with non-professional performers, Norman McLaren's optically printed classic, *Pas de Deux*, and *Cornered*, a black and white film experiment by former ballet dancer Michael Downing and performer Susanna Hood, that was presented with live sound mixed by Brennan Green. All of these were solid examples of hybrid art-making that took dance off the stage and into new expressive territory.

This edition of the festival marked a kind of watershed moment in which the range of dance on film and its potential for innovation finally became apparent to a broader audience. In Toronto at least, a lot of doubters reversed course at this time – the evidence of interest, energy and imagination within the screendance genre, *the potential*, finally solidified. We started seeing line-ups outside our venues, queues snaking along the sidewalks in advance of the most popular screenings. Our audiences were never enormous – we programmed for very small venues with room for 30 patrons and larger ones like the Bloor Cinema, that could seat 800. Sometimes those venues were full, but many screenings were sparsely attended (which didn't seem to bother those who were there). Local talent always drew the most support and matching programs with venues for optimal audience satisfaction and box office revenue became more and more important, the subject of much thought and discussion for Marc and myself.

The 1998 edition of the festival continued to build on that newfound screendance potential with partnerships. One of the most important was with BravoFACT!, the independent foundation wing of Bravo!, a Canadian arts broadcaster affiliated with CityTV. We made an agreement with them to premiere short films funded by the foundation at one of the few surviving Depression-era repertory cinemas in Toronto, the 400-seat Royal on College Street. The collaboration (which continued until 2005) was a high-profile celebration of Canadian artists with an old-time marquee out front, the smell of popcorn in the air, lots of press and a TIFF-style cocktail event afterwards. The BravoFACT! showcase, with its aura of star power and swish catered party, introduced the festival – and thus the hybrid phenomenon of dance on film – to hundreds of culture vultures and production industry-adjacent big wigs.

As the stakes got higher, so did the anxiety around projection – we rented and installed our own equipment and sound systems when the old rep houses couldn't handle the new digital formats. Hans Burgschmidt and an entire generation of technicians who trained with him hand-built systems in raw or under-equipped alternative spaces. To be honest, some of our screenings looked bad, the filmmakers bravely supporting their films after tear-filled sound checks. Audiences cheered regardless. But we worked hard at making our programming look as good as possible. Compilations of short films were painstakingly made and checked –

mixing formats such as VHS, betacam and digibeta in both native and international standards needed constant adjustment and attention. The materiality of film and these earlier video formats required human intervention for transportation and delivery. Anyone in the office with a driver's license got to play courier, the same way anyone with muscles would be recruited for cable pulling and teardown late at night post-screening. With the exception of actual projection, sound mixing and stage management, which we left to the pros, our tiny team did it all.

Projection quality became even more vital as we chased down world premieres. Premieres lend cachet and profile to any festival; for us they allowed important outreach to introduce something largely new and niche. When people discovered us through one of these high-profile premieres (films like Deepa Mehta's *Bollywood Hollywood* or Dan Geller and Dayna Goldfine's *Ballets Russes*), they almost always expressed delight at the novelty: "Dance and film together? Of course. How wonderful!"

Along with films from the UK, France and Canada, the big gala moment for Moving Pictures in 1998 was the opening night premiere of *Dancing in the Moment*, a documentary recounting the final dancing days of the National Ballet of Canada's beloved ballerina Karen Kain. Produced by Veronica Tennant and directed by Joan Tosoni, the event filled Jackman Hall with love and emotion, all the key players on hand.

Much less prestigious than world premieres but equally exciting for us was the inauguration of a new live event we called *The Anatomic Cabaret*. A nod to live performance with a focus on the body and movement, the Cabaret was also a chance to showcase the rich performance art tradition in Toronto, with practices ranging from Louise Liliefeldt's endurance works to Keith Cole's sly political drag. Some performances included projection or filmed components, many did not. *The Anatomic Cabaret* was often comical, sometimes outrageous. One year, parkour aficionado/filmmaker Justin Lovell and performer Troy Feldman literally jumped out of the screen to disrupt the event with a display of live physicality, bouncing off walls and wielding a head-mounted live-streaming GoPro. Another time, Cathy Gordon's video series *Inappropriate Dances* was augmented by the artist herself dancing inappropriately in the aisles. Basically, the Cabaret became a staged free-for-all hosted by local celebrities such as Olivia Chow, then a councillor, now mayor of Toronto and acclaimed dancer Peggy Baker.

In 1999, at the end of the 20th century, Moving Pictures consolidated past innovations and embarked on one major new one. We continued the partnership with Bravo!FACT and mounted a second Anatomic Cabaret. We presented a video-based installation, Irish artist Rachel Toomey's *Grave Dancing*, at V-tape, a video distribution hub that had become a regular festival partner. We presented Eileen Thalenberg's feature-length documentary, *Can't Stop Now*, that looked at ballet dancers over the age of forty. International gems included Isaac Julien's *Three*, choreographed by Ralph Lemon and Bebe Miller, Thierry De Mey and Michele Anne De Mey's *21 Etudes à danser*, Sasha Waltz's *Allee der Kosmonauten* and Philippe Decouflé's magical *Abracadabra*. We also added Peterborough, ON and Victoria, BC as touring stops and agreed to present a screening installation at Calgary's High Performance Rodeo. This was ample activity for a tiny organization. But the biggest step we took in 1999 was getting into film production ourselves.

As one-fifth of a Toronto-based arts collective known as i-culture, Moving Pictures signed on to a group film production project we dubbed *Quintet*. It consisted of five short film shoots

representing five distinct arts organizations: the new music ensemble Arraymusic, Bill James' site-specific dance group Atlas Moves Watching, feminist vocal collective URGE, Thom Sololoski's Autumn Leaf Performance ... and us, Moving Pictures. With a budget provided by the federal Department of Canadian Heritage and Bravo!FACT, Moving Pictures and friends oversaw production, a logistical feat that was also a rite of passage. Presented at the 1999 festival as a gala screening, *Quintet* would not be our last walk on the continuum between creation and presentation.



Photo of Jesse van Rooi by Vanessa Harwood; catalogue design by Lisa Kiss

## Into the 21st Century

The first festival of the new century consolidated local and international relationships that had been brewing over some time. Acclaimed Toronto designer Lisa Kiss contributed to stylish branding for festival materials using imagery derived from the very first festival trailer, a black and white effort featuring b-boy Jesse Van Rooi, directed by Gregory Nixon. *In the Round* was much more than a typical compilation of submission clips; rather, in one minute flat, it conveyed the tone and brash energy that the festival was noted for. Distributed as a broadcast PSA and used as advertisement by presenting partners, movie theatres – and even in the subway system – the trailer and promotional materials were the first in a series of striking annual marketing campaigns.

In addition to throwing a third Anatomic Cabaret at the Rivoli, we collaborated with Vtape on hosting *100 dancefilms: a temporary videotheque* with private screening stations and a library of Canadian and international screendance work. In fact, the entire festival embraced the idea of the archive as a vital source of both cultural preservation and creative inspiration. Patrick Bensard, filmmaker and director of the Cinémathèque de la danse in Paris, arrived to participate in a panel discussion called *Preserving Dance in a Disposable World*, with a suitcase full of treasures for public screening. Among them were early Lumiere Brothers clips, excerpts featuring Josephine Baker, the work of Roland Petit and Maurice Bejart, Loie



Fuller's Serpentine Dance, Anna Pavlova's Dying Swan solo, and several Jean-Paul Goude *bande annonces*. The Cinémathèque returned the favour in 2001 by inviting Marc and I to present a series of contemporary Canadian dancefilm screenings at the Palais de Chaillot, home of the Cinémathèque française in Paris.

Also in 2000, Moving Pictures curated programming for the annual Brighton Festival in Brighton UK, consolidating important partnerships and friendships with that festival and with UK organizations such as SouthEast Dance, The South West Film and Television Archive, Channel 4, and the Lighthouse Centre for digital technology.

Additionally, a blossoming relationship with Riccione TTV, a multidisciplinary festival in Riccione Italy, led to *Viva Italia*, a program of Italian video artists curated by that festival's director, Fabio Bruschi (who would visit Moving Pictures in person in 2002 with a second Italian showcase). An audio/video installation by Bologna-based artists Anna de Manincor, Anna Rispoli and Massimo Carozzi, *N.K. Never Keep Souvenirs of a Murder*, rounded out this energetic Italian takeover. Bruschi later welcomed a small team from Moving Pictures to his festival on the Adriatic. Here, in the warm embrace of Italian hospitality, we joined other international screendance practitioners to meet each other, watch and present work and participate in discussions both public and informal on a wide range of topics.



Photo of Jenn Goodwin by Vanessa Harwood; catalogue design by Lisa Kiss

Moving Pictures reached for the stars for its 10th anniversary in 2001, connecting the dots between dance, media and new technologies. The body/machine conference ran from October 26-28 at York University, immediately followed by a downtown festival edition from October 29 through November 3.

The conference featured roundtables, papers, installations and lecture demos by Yacov Sharir (EKG sensory collection technology and performance in *The Wearable Computer*) Isa

Gordon and Jesse Jarrell (creative cybernetic research in *The Psymbiote Speaks: On Generating the Cyborg Body*) and UK multimedia designer Terry Braun (*The Java Dance Project*). Conference films included the documentaries *The Liberation of the Body: Following in the Tracks of Jacques Dalcroze and his Students* and *Cyberman* by Peter Lynch. Installations around the York University campus and various downtown locations included *Estranged Body*, a collection of sculptural elements, images and video by Kinga Araya, the single-channel video *Strange Brew* by Gunilla Josephson, *Body@Rest*, an interactive performance installation by Mark Jones, *Touch* by performance artist and disability activist Petra Kupperts, *Bodysight* by Edinburgh-based interdisciplinary researcher Sophia Lycouris and *Alternate Interfaces* by the iconic Australian performance artist Stelarc. As I go through the records of this lineup I am a bit unsettled - “how did we do all this?” The conference themes accurately reflected our growing interest in technology and performance for sure, but how we mustered the resources to pull off an international academic conference and a full-on festival and tour within the space of a few months is truly beyond me. It’s no wonder Moving Pictures couldn’t be sustained.

Following the conference, the 2001 festival opened on October 29 with *The Nureyev Gala*, an ambitious fund-raising event and exhibition that paid tribute to an international ballet superstar who had a lasting impact on the Toronto dance scene. Wallace Potts, Rudolf Nureyev’s former partner, and filmmaker/research archivist with The Nureyev Foundation, came to town and charmed everyone in attendance at a photo exhibition, gala reception and film screening of rare clips (including bootleg teddy bear-cam super8 footage of Nureyev dancing at Toronto’s O’keefe Centre in the 60s) and a restored 35 mm print of Nureyev’s *Don Quixote* at Toronto’s Harbourfront Centre.

The international nature of this 10th festival continued with a master class from guest artist, UK filmmaker David Hinton, documentary screenings of Sophie Fiennes’ *the late Michael Clark*, Patrick Bensard’s *Le Mystere Babilée*, and Chantel Ackerman’s *Un jour Pina à demandé*. The festival also continued its collaborative ways with guest curators. Conceptualist Toronto filmmaker Deirdre Logue assembled a program dubbed *Instabilities*. Her artist note reads: “A collection of short works dedicated to the unpredictable intersections and subsequent influences of experimental dance on experimental film/video and vice versa ... Elevator dances, unhappy businessmen and twister game players toy with the medium of film and video to teach us all a few new moves.” Similarly energetic flirtations with experimental forms seemed to crop up each year – these were some of our favourite programs.

2002 marked a return to a more reasonably sized festival. We premiered a few feature films, notably Deepa Mehta’s *Bollywood Hollywood* and Tunisian filmmaker Raja Amari’s *Satin Rouge*. In association with the local Loop Collective, the festival presented *Liquid Bodies: An Evening of Experimental Cinema, Movement and Performance*, which explored the abstract body across media and disciplines. It included works by Amy Greenfield, Maya Deren, Ed Emschwiler, Doris Chase, David Rimmer, Sarah Abbott and Gariné Torossian. Although the programming was still diverse and thoughtful at this festival, I remember feeling that it was a relief to scale back for once.

The 2003 edition of what we had started referring to internally as ‘Mopix’ opened with world premieres of *The Firebird* directed by Barbara Willis Sweete, choreographed by James Kudelka and featuring the National Ballet of Canada, as well as the premiere of Veronica Tennant’s short film, *A Pairing of Swans*. The screening took place at our favourite theatre in

the city, The Royal. As real estate development fever started to impact Toronto more violently, this Art Deco-era cinema had been saved by a private consortium that installed post-production studios on the third floor to keep the cinema going in its historic midtown Little Italy location. At the same time, south to Lake Ontario, Moving Pictures was setting up new digs in a reclaimed Victorian industrial complex known as The Distillery. Here, our year-round studio and office space in the former Case Goods warehouse for whiskey came with wide wooden plank floors, high ceilings, community-minded neighbours and a resident ghost. We shot a trailer featuring local dance artist Andrea Nann in unrenovated buildings from the 1800s just across the cobbled road. Being in this historical part of Toronto in a non-domestic studio space allowed us to branch out into new sites and venues and offer activities like *Beats for Brats*, with dance film programming aimed at kids aged 10 to 14. Alongside this event, curator Vicky Chainey Gagnon facilitated a dance video workshop for budding young filmmakers. We also launched the *Salon Series*, informal talks and screenings by artists and curators held in our new studio. Our first guests were Kelly Hargraves and Lynette Kessler from Dance Camera West in Los Angeles.

In the Canada Dances series, director Alison Murray made an impact with *Aeroplane Man* using an easy-going camera style to capture British-based writer-performer Jonzi D. riffing on the idea of homeland. In her film directing debut, choreographer Marie Chouinard's *Cantique #1* presented powerhouse performances by company dancers Carol Prieur and Benoît Lachambre. And on a program highlighting jazz dance, audiences were treated to historic footage of black American jazz dancers and musicians, including eighty-year-old archival footage of the Nicholas Brothers courtesy of the Cinémathèque de la danse in Paris. We took both programs to Montreal later in the year for a week's run at The Cinémathèque Québécoise.

Moving Pictures' friendship with UK practitioners and presenters in London (The Place, BBC and Channel 4) and Brighton (SouthEast Dance, the Brighton Festival) had continued to grow with each festival and research trip we made to England. After showing several of Brighton filmmaker/performer Liz Aggiss' films in previous editions, Aggiss and collaborator Billy Cowie came over for a residency in 2004. They brought *The Men in the Wall*, a 4-screen, 3D installation which we presented in partnership with Trinity Square Video. The pair also taught a performance workshop for aspiring interdisciplinary performers.

Vicky Bloor, an administrator at South East Dance in Brighton joined us for several weeks to observe and help with festival coordination, including preliminary work on an international production project that would take place the following year. And SouthEast Dance Board chair, the respected BBC producer Bob Lockyer (who pioneered the presentation of short dancefilms on television in the UK) also visited, serving on the Awards Jury with filmmaker Evann Siebens and DJ/social justice crusader Zahra Dhanani.

Programs in 2004 included a tribute to flamenco superstar Carmen Amaya on screen, an NFB documentary about influential Quebec choreographer Jean-Pierre Perreault, and *Flail and Flower: Experiments in Movement*, yet another program exploring the intersections of experimental forms featuring work by John Oswald, Keith Cole and Michael Caines. The festival opened and closed at The Royal Cinema with the Bravo!FACT screening and party on opening night and a double bill of *A Delicate Battle* by Mark Adam and Matjash Mrozewski and *Circa* with Holy Body Tattoo and Tiger Lilies closing out the festival.

The big news in 2005 was the production and launch of 4X4, a series of films co-produced by Moving Pictures and BravoFACT in Canada and SouthEast Dance and Channel 4 in the UK. For this project, 2 emerging UK artists (Magali Charrier and Vena Ramphal) and 2 Canadians (Jenn Goodwin and Marlee Cargill) joined forces in Toronto to make their films under a shared production umbrella. The resulting short films – *Tralala*, *Dress Code*, *Stuck* and *Fold* – were then screened in Toronto, Brighton and London and broadcast on Channel 4 and Bravo! The project was exhilarating and educative for all concerned but, as is the way with production, went over budget. Not by much, but it added to the existential precarity for Moving Pictures.



4 X 4 Dress Code by Marlee Cargill. Photo by Gregory Nixon; postcard design by Lisa Kiss

When it came time to mount the festival, an exhausted Moving Pictures team also supported the Canadian premiere of Alison Murray's first feature film *Mouth to Mouth*, featuring Elliot Page. Canada Dances was moved into the intimate and atmospheric Camera Bar on Queen West in an attempt to scale back on the workload and create a different, more informal kind of screening experience. We premiered *Blush*, a feature by Wim Vandekuybus and the Ultima Vez company from Belgium, there as well. Our experimental showcase, *Fractured Fairy Tales: Experiments in Movement* took us back to our roots at the tiny (now gone) John Spotton Cinema. The scaling back strategy did not work - key Moving Pictures staff (specifically me) were burned out, fed up, tired after years of going full tilt with limited resources and keenly feeling the insecurity of all arts presentation in Canada. Although we had acquired annual operating support from all levels of arts councils over the years, funding never felt truly stable. Advocates came and went and things could change suddenly when a new government was elected and started implementing new policies. Each new festival programming innovation required separate project funding that involved labour-intensive grant applications created from scratch with no guarantee of success. Grant results seemed to arrive later and later each year necessitating tough decisions about whether to risk going ahead with projects without money in the bank. More and more of our time and energy was being funnelled into fundraising and strategic development research, areas in which, I at least,

had no interest. The drudgery of certain tasks and thoughts of ‘do we have to keep doing this forever’ began to offset the genuine excitement we had for presenting new work in new ways. We had come far from our roots. Perhaps too far.

We started thinking about what closing down could look like. Could we digitize our collections? How would we handle artist permissions? Where would this digital archive live? What about the physical artifacts? How would we devise a transition in a way that wasn’t shocking to the community we had painstakingly built over the years. We consulted with veteran archivist Theresa Rowat and started looking around for support to create a legacy archive.

It was with this in mind that Moving Pictures threw itself a fundraising gala to present Dana Goldfine and Dan Geller’s glorious documentary *Ballets Russes* ahead of its Canadian theatrical run in December of 2005. The event itself was amazing: former Ballets Russes soloist Raven Wilkinson came to Toronto to introduce the film, sharing dramatic stories about being a black artist on tour with the classical company in the segregated American South of the 1950s. But the funds we raised were minimal, not enough.

2006. The fifteenth and final festival. We returned fully to our Queen Street West roots and consolidated all of our events under one roof, the gloriously re-purposed and arts-friendly Gladstone Hotel on West Queen West. Word got out that this was the last festival, and the opening night event held in the capacious Gladstone Ballroom was packed with fans and artists, many of whom had launched careers at Moving Pictures.

With a compact programming schedule over three nights, Moving Pictures ended with a showing of the old - *Fifteen Candles*, selected films from a decade and a half of curation – and the new – *Dancing Shadows*, a final Canadian showcase of premieres. The board and staff carved up an enormous birthday cake and poured champagne for the entire audience at intermission, and it was over.

## **Wrapping It Up**

Over the years, we had moved to ever larger venues, added symposia and pitch sessions, developed a juried and people’s choice awards program, dipped into the production of commissioned works, and undertook a cross-Canada touring program. Internationally, we partnered with Canada House, SouthEast Dance and the Brighton Festival in the UK, the Cinémathèque de la danse in Paris and other dance film friendly presenters in France, Greece, Italy, Germany and Monaco to bring the work of Canadian screendance artists to the world.

We weathered the disruptive transition from hand-delivered film print submissions to online screeners and new digital formats for projection. Fifteen years later, worn out by the annual grind, still having to resist expansion because we were still under-resourced, we threw in the towel. Anticipated transition funding never transpired. We packed everything into boxes that went into storage for the next decade. Those materials were eventually donated to Dance Collection Danse, Canada’s dance archive.

We consoled ourselves with the certainty that some enterprising person or organization would step up to replace Moving Pictures, and we were mentally prepared to support them. It just never happened.

## Legacies: Dancefilm in Toronto Today

Although Moving Pictures is long gone, many in Toronto remember it fondly. A festival of its scope and scale has not returned, but there are several sturdy forums for making and exhibiting dance on film and video. During the pandemic much of the action went online and this persists post-pandemic. Many more people can watch dance-based works on YouTube or Vimeo or other bespoke platforms, though it's not quite the same as old school screenings in a proper cinema with a concession stand in the lobby and real people to talk to after the show. But that's just part and parcel of changes within the industry, new approaches to screen technologies and a growing tendency for audiences to consume arts and entertainment at home alone or with a few friends. The pandemic cemented these behaviours and it's uncertain if audiences will ever fully return to theatres.

Since COVID, several Toronto dance presenters – including Fall for Dance North (until 2025), DanceWorks, and DanceOntario's Dance Weekend – have started commissioning and presenting screendance in theatres and online. Annually, the RT Collective commissions and presents a number of new works by local artists. And every second year, the dance: made in/ fait au canada festival (d:mic/fac) launches an extensive film series, for both in-person and online audiences. I've been programming these films and the festival is directed by dance artist Yvonne Ng, a vital player at every single Moving Pictures festival, including the first. Moving Pictures' DNA is embedded in d:mic/fac and that feels good. We even named our juried film award *The Moving Pictures Award*.

Further afield, the festival of recorded movement (aka F.O.R.M) in Vancouver, the Guelph Dance Festival, and the WildDogs International ScreenDance Festival in Calgary continue to create, show and disseminate new Canadian work. The scene in Montreal and Quebec is very robust, with screendance getting prominent exposure at the annual Festival International du films sur l'art and the nomadic francophone screendance festival, Cinédanse. In 2023, the Montreal and Gaspé-based organization Mandoline Hybride curated and launched an ambitious online archive of Canadian screendance works, *Collection Regards Hybrids*.

Artists who were featured at early Moving Pictures festivals are thriving in a range of hybrid practices. They include Allen and Karen Kaeja, who continue to make screendance works, individually and together. Choreographer William Yong has a prolific career as both a director and dancemaker; he recently presented his first ballet commission with the National Ballet of Canada. Philip Szporer and Marlene Miller continue to create dance films and documentaries together through Mouvement Perpetuel, while Miller also works with composer/performer Sandy Silva on a series of body percussion and dance-based community engagement film projects through *The Migration Project*. Laura Taler, who won the festival's very first Cinedance Award for *the village trilogy* back in 1995, has a hybrid practice that blends screen work with installation, sculpture and performance. Evann Siebens is working with large scale projection installations in Vancouver and internationally. Alison Murray makes feature films showcasing an enduring passion for dance forms such as tango. Nick de Pencier, who shot and directed many of the Canadian works presented at Moving Pictures in the early days, enjoys an international career making documentaries with his partner Jennifer Baichwal. And so on.

Today, for me, The Moving Pictures Festival represents a moment in time, a different time, when the real estate market didn't determine the intensity of cultural production in cities like Toronto, when competition for government arts funding was a little less stiff and politically

fraught, when it was still possible to harness social capital and community spirit to achieve the vision of an annual screendance party fueled by exuberant interdisciplinary collisions and collaborations.



**Kathleen Smith** is a Toronto-based writer, filmmaker and web designer with an interest in the arts. As a writer, she has investigated issues in performance and culture for many publications and platforms, both print and online. Smith was Editor in chief at *The Dance Current* and [thedancecurrent.com](http://thedancecurrent.com) from 2011 – 2014. As a film producer at Hellhound Productions, Smith worked on short films and features for Channel 4, TV Ontario, the Sundance Channel, Bravo! and the Knowledge Network and presented festival premieres at Hot Docs, Toronto International Film Festival, Regent Park Film Festival and Buenos Aires International Film Festival.

Prior to getting into film, Smith was Artistic Director at the Moving Pictures Festival of Dance on Film and Video from 1992 – 2006. More recently, she was on the programming committee for the online Collection *Regards Hybrides*, launched in 2023 and continues to program film at the biannual *dance: made in / fait au canada* festival. Smith also teaches video dance and intermedial performance at York University in Toronto.