

Opine Dance Film Festival: The Little Festival That Could

By Britt Whitmoyer Fishel

Abstract

Opine Dance Film Festival (ODFF) was founded in Atlanta in 2015, bringing screendance to a community just beginning to experience the practice in a more developed way. After four seasons of presenting professionally adjudicated and student programming, *ODFF* had planned on changing formats. After relocating the festival to Philadelphia, *ODFF* planned its 5th season to be screened in gallery format, looping three ambitious programs over the course of three days on the campus of Bryn Mawr College. On March 11, 2020, Bryn Mawr College announced that it would close its doors and move remote for the remainder of the semester, due to Covid-19. With only one week before the festival was to launch and with the world changing by the minute, *ODFF* quickly decided to put the 35 films online and stream them as curated, during the original festival dates. In doing so, the online reach far surpassed the exposure of our in-person event. As the pandemic continued, *ODFF* realized its festival plans for 2021 and 2022 would have to continue online. As the festival prepared for the changes needed to sustain, it watched closely as practitioners everywhere were now dabbling with the camera. Dancers and dance makers were turning to digital practices to carry them through the pandemic. The team established a new category to accommodate professional artists who were newer to the medium or experimenting with the camera for the first time. This category, called “The Newbie Filmmaker,” has become a staple for *ODFF* and the 2023 festival was the third time screening the program. Now culminating in its 10th season, *ODFF* was fortunate to partner with the well-established Bryn Mawr Film Institute, but entering a “post-Covid” world with a small festival has been daunting. What is the best screening model for the small, but mighty festival? Stepping into the unknown has taught everyone: Adaptability is key.

Opine Dance Film Festival: The Little Festival That Could

Opine Dance Film festival (ODFF) was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 2015, as a way to provide a much-needed screendance offering to the community. The festival, in its inception, was hosted and produced by *Atlanta Dance Collective*, a non-profit contemporary dance company, run by Co-Artistic Directors, Britt Whitmoyer Fishel and Sarah Stokes. Small, but mighty, the program itself ran in conjunction with the company’s annual season of performances, as a way to introduce those less familiar with the artistic practice, to the world of screendance and dance film.

The mission of *ODFF* has always been to celebrate dance filmmakers locally, nationally, and internationally who are creating work with meaning. *ODFF* seeks films that speak to wider themes of identity, defying conventions, crossing borders, and pushing boundaries. The program prioritizes both inclusion and diversity through the marriage of dance and film, while also emphasizing the democratization of socioeconomic, political, and identity-driven conversations across cultures, contexts and locations.¹ It has also always been a mission to provide screendance to communities at no, or low-cost, maximizing accessibility in the field.



For the first four years of programming, the *ODFF* followed a traditional format with annual, theatrical film screenings. During that time, the festival received an average of 150-200 submissions per year, split between Professional and Student categories. The curatorial team was comprised of the Artistic Directors and Company Dancers of *Atlanta Dance Collective* and the festival was screened each season at Synchronicity Theatre in Midtown Atlanta. At the end of year four, Fishel relocated to the Philadelphia suburbs and brought the festival north for the fifth season.

March 2020 would have kicked off the fifth annual *ODFF*. In a sea of many changes, not only was the festival moved from Atlanta, Georgia to the suburbs of Philadelphia, but it was set to be changing formats from traditional screenings to a gallery exhibition. Bryn Mawr College was housing the festival in their Rhys Carpenter Library, open to students and the public at no cost. The curatorial team expanded to professional dance and screendance artists in the region, and of the 210 submissions received that season, thirty-five were selected across two professional programs and one student program.

Then, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic.² As the reality and seriousness set in, Universities and Colleges across the country closed their campuses and moved to remote and online platforms of learning. Bryn Mawr College made the decision on that same day, in an effort to disrupt the spread of COVID-19, to close its doors and move to a remote format. Unfortunately for *ODFF*, that meant the event had been canceled only nine days before its intended opening. The films had been programmed, the promotional materials purchased, and the team had invested time and labor into getting the small festival ready for a new season. Artists are often taught the art of pivoting, the principle of changing strategy or direction in the face of adversity. At that moment, *ODFF*'s Artistic Director, Britt Whitmoyer Fishel had to act fast. On that same day, Fishel took steps to move the festival online, releasing a statement to the filmmakers and the public:

“As you know, *Opine Dance Film Festival* was set for March 20-21 at Bryn Mawr College, outside of Philadelphia. The Bryn Mawr College community is currently without confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19. However, Bryn Mawr College has made the decision to prioritize the wellbeing of the campus community and beyond, while following public health recommendations and contributing to the global effort to disrupt the spread of COVID-19.

That being said, Bryn Mawr College is moving to a remote format for students and faculty, and thus will not be able to continue with our event on campus.

We are disappointed, but understand the gravity and importance of the health and safety of our community and beyond. As there is uncertainty moving forward, with the evolving situation, rescheduling is not a possibility.

Therefore, we have decided to produce *Opine Dance Film Festival* online for this season. The festival will run on its predetermined dates, March 20-21, and will be available in its original programming (Professional Program A, Professional Program B, Student Program).

Online audience members will still get to vote for the Festival Favorite (from the adjudicated Professional Programs), which will be awarded with laurels at the end of the festival.

We are a small festival and are disappointed with the waste of resources dedicated towards the gallery technology and print materials, but are focused on thinking beyond ourselves, while caring for each other and the larger world.

We thank you for your understanding and continued support, and will be in touch soon with more information regarding the online viewing galleries.”

While most of the response was understanding and supportive, moving the programming online did change the dynamic and outcomes of the festival. After reaching out to each filmmaker, the festival lost one of the planned thirty-five films. The filmmaker was not interested in an online world premiere, which was understandable. Knowing that the audience itself would change by moving the films online, the festival as people knew it changed completely. Several screendance festivals host their screenings in the month of March, so *ODFF* was not alone in the scramble, but as a smaller festival with less support, and the tight timeline, the pressure set in.

In the span of a week, the films in their original programming were uploaded onto a Vimeo Channel. As the programming was originally free of cost to audiences, no paywall was established, and on March 20th, the festival launched online for the world to watch and enjoy. Over the course of the weekend, the programming reached a scope of audiences that would never have been possible in an in-person format. By the end of the festival, the viewership was well over 1,100 unique viewers. In a moment of so much global uncertainty, the festival provided artistic connection across borders, creating a hopeful prospect during that time. In an interview with *Thinking Dance* about the festival occurring during the pandemic, Fishel stated:

I’m noticing a resurgence, an awakening of people paying attention to screendance now, which I’m grateful for. I’m happy that there is attention drawn to finding new ways of using digital space. There really is a silver lining in this precarious time of uncertainty.³

To that end, over the next several months, as the world continued to stay under lockdown, it became clear that choreographers and dancers were going to have to find alternative ways to sustain their practice. As written in Fishel’s first chapter of *The Screendance Practitioner’s Workbook*:

People who had pushed back against using video as a medium in their dance practice were now suddenly trying to navigate the digital landscape alongside screendance makers who had been in practice for 30+ years. Both professional and educational institutions were figuring out ways to move forward technologically, when the ephemeral nature of live performance had come to a halt. High school and college dance programs were presenting dance film concerts online, as were professional companies. Dance film festivals also moved online, creating a saturated market of digital dance content, ranging from novice to expert. While some groups collaborated safely with professional filmmakers, I often watched independent dance artists and students dabbling with their phones to capture their choreography.⁴

From a curatorial perspective, *ODFF* was interested in expanding the programming to fit the changing landscape during this time period. In the planning process, two new programs were established: “In The Time of Covid” and “The Newbie Filmmaker.” Films submitted to “In The Time of Covid” were conceptualized, created, and executed between March 2020 and December 2020. The films were either related to experiences in isolation or quarantine through the subject and theme of the work, or through the structure of making the film. This could be seen visually through solo-making, social distancing, masks, or limited use of equipment. Films submitted to “The Newbie Filmmaker” were specifically meant for professional dance artists who have transitioned their practice to film, but were experimenting with the medium for the first time, either through collaboration or by themselves. This has since expanded to include professional filmmakers who are new to collaborating or working with dance.

ODFF’s call for films traditionally opens in the summertime, and it was clear early on that we would still be online for the 2021 season. Knowing that ahead of time, the festival was able to include that programming change into FilmFreeway, while easily expanding the programs offered to include “In The Time of Covid” and “The Newbie Filmmaker,” without much financial issue. The festival received 250 submissions for its sixth season and, of that total, over half were submitted for the new programs. This confirmed that changing the programming to fit the evolving field was the right decision. Forty-four films across the four screening categories were programmed and uploaded into a Vimeo Showcase. Using a Showcase platform, instead of a Channel on Vimeo, allowed for better protection of the films online. Users can manage the privacy and customization, for a better audience experience. The sixth season of *ODFF* culminated March 25th through 28th, 2021.

After two years of online programming, the festival (and the world) was itching to get back to doing things in person. In June 2021, new reported Covid-19 cases-by-day hit an all-time low in the US.⁵ In optimism, *ODFF* secured a small, in-person venue in Philadelphia for the seventh season. *ODFF* announced the call in July, keeping the festival’s original Professional category, and the newly successful “The Newbie Filmmaker” category, as its two main screenings. Unfortunately, in fall 2021, the Omicron variant started to spread and by January 2022, it was reaching peak levels, changing the trajectory of the pandemic.⁶ Once again, *ODFF* found themselves at a crossroads of canceling another in-person event for the safety of the community. At the same time, other in-person events were happening with strategies of testing and masking, using ventilation precautions, or requiring vaccination for entry. The location of *ODFF*’s event was small and ventilation was going to be an issue. In addition to limiting the audience size for each screening, there would need to be designated time in between screenings for ventilation, which was impractical.

Once again, to prioritize the health and safety of the community and to provide a better outcome for the festival and filmmakers, *ODFF* moved back online for the third season in a row. The reception from the filmmakers was positive and understanding. At this point, the pandemic had lasted two years, still with great uncertainty moving forward. Programs and events were in a constant state of change, which required flexibility at any moment from artists and producers. For the seventh season, *ODFF* received 175 submissions and programmed 19 films between the two categories. The festival ran on its predetermined dates, March 26-27, 2022 on Vimeo Showcase. With each year, the quality of the online programming increased, understanding the fluidity of the platform and user ability.

In the spring of 2022, Fishel established a relationship with Bryn Mawr Film Institute, only a short distance away from Bryn Mawr College, where Fishel is on the Dance Faculty. From their website:

Bryn Mawr Film Institute (BMFI) is a non-profit movie theater and film education center outside of Philadelphia in Bryn Mawr, PA. BMFI is dedicated to promoting shared experiences that entertain, engage, and educate audiences through a diverse range of independent-minded films, a full curriculum of courses, and an extensive program of special events.⁷

BMFI invited Fishel and students to participate in an event, pairing a screening of the 2019 San Francisco Dance Film Festival, with additional student dance films from Fishel's screendance class that semester. The event was in April, only a week after *ODFF*'s seventh season, which took place online. Covid-19 cases were again on the decline⁸, so with proof of vaccination and masking, this event was held in person. Leaving that theater on a high and with optimism once more, Fishel approached them to partner for *ODFF*'s eighth season, to which they happily agreed.

As the festival was moving back into in-person screenings, questions arose: Would there still be an audience? Is this still the best way to share screendance programming? Are we diving headfirst back to familiarity, without considering the lessons of the last three seasons?

The one thing that drove the festival back to an in-person, traditional screening again was the human aspect of it all; the community. In the three years of online screenings, the festival reached people and communities farther than *ODFF*'s small festival could ever reach in person. However, being in a room together, the kinesthetic empathy of listening to a fellow filmmaker's experiences and processes, the visceral feeling while watching a film on a larger-than-life screen in a dark theater, these were important ideas and values. After three seasons without that connection, the choice to return seemed clear.

One change that stayed with the festival was the programming of "The Newbie Filmmaker" category, which BMFI eventually renamed to "Emerging." It has been clear that since 2020, more choreographers and dancers are interested in pursuing technology in their practice and are continuing to experiment with dance on camera. While the boundaries of this category have expanded to include anyone new to working with the medium, filmmakers included, creating and maintaining an inclusive space for these artists has become a priority for *ODFF* and its mission.

In March of 2023, after three seasons of online screenings, *ODFF* held its first in-person event since 2019. The 8th Annual Opine Dance Film Festival took place at BMFI with two programs: "Professional" and "Emerging." The audiences were intimate, as expected. On one hand, communities were itching for interaction and engagement outside of their homes. On the other, it had been three years of major change with a predisposition of staying home and attending less. One major positive from the event was offering an in-person talk back from the directors and filmmakers who were present. Artist talkbacks can contribute to the cultural enrichment of a community by exposing residents to different art forms and diverse perspectives. This exposure can lead to a greater appreciation for cultural diversity and artistic expression and was one benefit that was missing from *ODFF*'s online screenings.

A major point of interest, as the festival moved through its 9th season, was to recognize growth perspectives. Would the *ODFF* audience slowly start to grow and return, or would it experience something similar as the year prior? Unfortunately, the answer to that was not what the festival coordinators had hoped. Not only did the festival experience a decline in video submissions from the year prior, but as the festival culminated in April 2024, it encountered similar attendance levels to the year prior. A surprising note in the analysis was that in both seasons after the return to in-person screenings, ticket sales were higher for the “Emerging” programming, over the “Professional.” Could this speak directly to the current screendance landscape, the demographic of audience members interested in screendance in the Philadelphia region, all of the above, or none of the above? This will be interesting to track as the festival proceeds.

With anything, meaningful and sustainable progress often requires patience. The pandemic changed the way artists and producers work and make. In reflection for *ODFF*, the shifts sustained over the three years of Covid-19 have been mostly positive. We released what no longer served the program, and have remained open to adjustments where needed. A smaller festival in the screendance community, *ODFF* persevered by embracing change, exploring new possibilities, and staying open to growth. In the future, the festival may include mixed models for viewing, as it explores continued accessibility, connecting dance films to as many audience members as possible. The festival found a wonderful home and partnership with BMFI, which shares many of the same values and missions, but as the practice and our audience continues to evolve and change, an online platform does resonate with our values. As the festival celebrates its 10th season, the lens as always, is on the dance filmmaker. For year ten, we made the decision to screen the festival online, this time by choice, with goals of democratizing access to dance cinema, nurturing both artistic voices and audience appreciation in a powerful, boundary-breaking way. We hope to foster opportunities for increased visibility and recognition through the flexibility of streaming our programming. *ODFF* will continue to celebrate and promote the intersection of dance and film, serving as a nexus for creativity, collaboration, and appreciation within the screendance communities, advancing the art of dance on screen.

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