

Reflections on Dance Camera West

Interview by Cara Hagan

In April of 2024, Cara Hagan sat down with Kelly Hargraves, co-founder of Dance Camera West, the oldest dance film festival in Los Angeles to talk about the origins of the festival and what makes it special. Of high importance is DCW's commitment to distribution and diversity in dance film, which influences how the festival is produced and what activities are on offer each season.

Cara Hagan: Kelly, can you tell me when and how Dance Camera West began?

Kelly Hargraves: The festival started in 2000. I moved to Los Angeles from New York, where I had been working at Dance on Camera and at NYU doing my dance film research. I decided I wanted to do a festival in LA. I was introduced to Lynette Kessler, who was also interested in dance film festivals, so we joined forces. Like a lot of festivals, we saw that there was this amazing art form that people around us had no access to and said, "let's change that!" Before all that I worked at film festivals in Montreal, so this festival is a perfect combination of my day jobs in film and my passion in dance.

CH: Something unique about Dance Camera West as compared to other screendance festivals is that in addition to screening films, you work to distribute them. How did you get into distributing dance films?

KH: In New York, I shared an office with the VP of distribution at First Run Features, who I still work for. I would be watching [dance films] while writing my thesis and he said, "these are amazing, can you get me more?" So we created the Dance for Camera DVD in 2002 and later Dance for Camera 2 in 2008. Those two volumes are still in universities around the world. Instead of a third DVD volume, I approached a streaming partner I worked with called Ovid tv. I know who to ask. It's not a hard sell because it's a beautiful art form even if they know they're not going to make a lot of money. When it gets down to me paying royalties, the math is just impossible because it gets down to pennies.

CH: You describe Dance Camera West as a festival that supports artists. Talk to me specifically about how Dance Camera West supports artists beyond screenings, and how those support systems came to be within the organization.

KH: First of all, it's giving [artists] a platform and a place to show these films professionally, as well as and a way to build a community. That community-building has remained an essential focus of the festival, especially since I returned as Artistic Director in 2018 after taking a hiatus to make my own work from 2007 to 2017. After COVID, that was also a huge focus. In 2021 we rebounded and were able to show 70 films with about 35 filmmakers attend from all over the world. That vibe is what we go for. That's why we do things like revival films (like *Stop Making Sense* and *PINA in 3D*) and parties and luncheons. Thank God I have a board who likes to do that kind of stuff because it's a lot of time and money to pull off, but really builds that sense of community. We do a lot of workshops now. We've brought in Karen Pearlman, Katrina McPherson, Javier DeFrutos, Gabri Christa, and Cara Hagan. We've had some good community



partners and sponsors so some workshops are free and a lot of people attend. Beyond that we now produce some films through the KDACC Creative Corps grant in Central California and the NEA Project grant program. It's a three-prong mission now: PREPARE: PRODUCE: PRESENT.

CH: To follow up on that, you've been working on diversifying the field of screendance through your efforts. How?

KH: The first thing we did was diversify who watches the films, so it's not just me and two of my middle-aged white lady friends. After working at the performing arts center REDCAT, and living in LA where we pay a lot of attention to identity, I couldn't let myself do that. So we identified almost a hundred LA-based performers and filmmakers and each year 30 to 40 show up to watch the films on a preview selection committee. Of course, I don't always agree with them, but, that's the point. It's not supposed to be what I want. So that's our curation process — If there is one, that's it. This also helps diversify the audience. We also invite other LA artists to present special programs, like Suchi Bronfman's *Dancing Behind Prison Walls*. The goals are making better work by changing what's on screen, and changing who's behind the camera. We've been successfully seeing our films tour and win awards. Irishia Hubbard-Romaine for example, who said that she hadn't planned to be a dance filmmaker, has been in our mentoring program, been commissioned for work, and has been on our Board. Now she's a professor and her work is everywhere! She wins awards, she's in a ton of festivals. And so this is about creating a support system for talented emerging artists to grow.

Finding revenue for artists is also a part of the support. We have a PBS broadcast deal, and we tour films. We find grants where and whenever we can. We work to be a conduit to opportunities. The KDACC grant is connected to social justice projects because of the people making them. We have one film that's with the homeless population, one with an African-American fitness instructor, one featuring an L-G-B-T-Q individual going through transition and mental illness, and one about domestic labor where we worked with community members as performers. The artists are making documentaries, where movement is the language.

I'm really grateful and happy that so many people are part of the DCW community and that I can support them. It's great. Some years!

CH: That is incredible. Thanks for sharing! Any advice for folks wanting to get into screendance from a programming and festival producing perspective?

KH: Make work, watch a lot of films, show up, get organized and be connected to your community of artists.