

Interview with the 2021 Curators for the Third Coast Dance Film Festival

A companion to *The Third Coast Dance Film Festival and COVID-19 Adaptive Programing in 2021*

by Rosie Trump

In December of 2020, I conducted interviews with each of the three guest curators Ellen Duffy, Eve Allen Garza, and Laura Gutierrez for the Third Coast Dance Film Festival. The aim of the interviews was to reflect on and document the curatorial process. The interviews include a general discussion of process, but also directed conversation around how COVID-19 impacted the experience of seeing and evaluating screendance. These conversations take into consideration all the films that were reviewed for the festival, not just the finalists selected for the screenings in February 2021. (Interviews have been edited for clarity and brevity).

Laura Gutierrez

Interviewed on December 12, 2020

Rosie Trump: I am thinking about your background with this form, from having attended the Third Coast Film Festival in the early years in Houston, having been a dancer in various dance film projects, and being a guest curator in other dance film festivals. Did you have expectations going into the curatorial process, in terms of what you might see, thinking about your own viewer aesthetics?

Laura Gutierrez: Immediately the thing that comes to mind is the submission count. I just knew that there was going to be so much more than past seasons, just because of the nature of where dancers are at [because of shelter in place]. Film is the go-to format to safely reach audiences right now.

RT: You anticipated there was going to be COVID responsiveness in the submissions before you even began viewing?

LG: Yes absolutely. I was expecting a wide range of production value, because of that window between April to June [2020] when we started reviewing films. When everyone was creating in isolation with whatever they had-- their cell phones or a friend's camera. Also, I automatically assumed all the films would be outside or in people's homes. I was most curious to see how people were using their cameras and spaces.

RT: Did you notice themes or a certain tone arc in the submission this season?

LG: Animation and hybrid animation. Other themes I noticed were whimsical and dream-like scenarios, landscapes, and outside elements.

RT: It seemed like people were hyper mindful of environment, interior or exterior, thinking about global warming or thinking about quarantine-- it was really foregrounded.

LG: I remember noticing a lot darker themes and performances.



RT: I agree a lot of the work had a very heavy tone. Reflections around the psychological, uneasy and weighted.

LG: I also recall how powerful it was to see a work that was so quirky, it was a relief and a break from the heavy. Seeing something joyous-- I was ready for it!

RT: A lot of submissions dealt so well with portraying the current anxiety and fear so many of us were feeling. There was work that was really relatable, showing me the anxiety I was experiencing in the moment, but then the other side of it there was also the work that I needed to see that transformed and lifted me from how I was feeling.

So thinking about that as a curator, what's the balance between work that reflects our current situation and then work that delivers us beyond our current moment?

LG: Yes, and another thing I was thinking about coming from a technical emphasis in dance. How do we use our circumstances as inspiration, but also push artistically and challenge technically? It anchored me in the choice making. I was looking for high artistic quality with filming and editing.

RT: Are there any other observations about the curator experience?

LG: In terms of articulating that we want to highlight female directors and choreographers and BIPOC submissions, that was a relief in a way, as a Latinx person, being part of something where someone has already acknowledged that and taken it into consideration, helped.

Eve Allen Garza

Interviewed on December 3, 2020

Rosie Trump: Did you notice themes or a certain tone arc in the submission this season?

Eve Allen Garza: I remember when I first started watching the submissions thinking, "Oh this one's about COVID, and oh this one's about COVID, too." Because in the beginning of reviewing, I didn't think that was going to be what I experienced. I knew there would be some—but it was so soon. COVID shut downs happened at the end of March and the Third Coast Dance Film Festival's first submission deadline was June 1. There were an astounding amount of films that were made in a one or two-month period.

RT: Do you feel like COVID influenced your curatorial point of view?

EAG: No. I think I was still able to decide if a film was checking the boxes of what I was most interested in. Was it light-hearted, clever, succinct, innovative? These were all the things I was looking for whether they were responding to COVID or not.

RT: Your film pick for the best of festival award "Dancing is an Old Friend" [directed by Marta Renzi] was a film that was clearly made during the time of COVID, can you talk about your response to that film? Because I think something that resonated for both of us, in regards to this film was the way other themes shined through the lens of COVID quarantine, specifically.

EAG: I related to that one a lot, thinking about starting a family and having a baby, it was very personal. Dance doesn't go away as you go through life stages. I appreciate that it was low budget, that it was two women, that checking on a friend during COVID was what instigated this project. It felt relevant, but it didn't feel heavy, and also relatable to non-dancers. It was so genuine. It felt really honest.

Ellen Duffy

Interviewed on December 16, 2020

Rosie Trump: You were a curator for last season's program, as well as this year's. What differences, if any, did you notice right away?

Ellen Duffy: Crisis response was a huge theme this year. I also think the intersection of dance and technology is becoming a much bigger highway for people, and it's cool to see what people are making. I am excited by work that makes me ask: How did you make that? What was the process?

RT: How did your own personal COVID experiences this summer impact how you saw your role as a curator? Did you relate to the work differently (perhaps because of quarantine, uncertainty, income instability, stress?)

ED: There were a lot of themes I really related to: isolation and feeling stifled by stress. As a curator, I looked for those things in the films that were dealing with being uncertain about the future. I have come to the realization lately of how excellently social and economic issues can be presented by dance and the arts, so I was looking for films that spoke to those issues. This collective experience of COVID foregrounds the similar themes and ideas people are working on.

RT R: The idea of collective is interesting, because there are a lot of collective connections happening through dance and the arts, and socially. But also in some ways we are more isolated than ever with travel restrictions, events being canceled, not being able to gather. It's a dichotomy that was reflected in a lot of the film submissions.