

**Book Review: *Screendance from Film to Festival: Celebration and Curatorial Practice* by Cara Hagan (2022)**

Mary Wycherley

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*Screendance from Film to Festival: Celebration and Curatorial Practice* is a timely and rich mapping of screendance histories, stories, eras and legacy largely through the prism of festivals and their development. Hagan's commitment to the field, as a screendance artist, scholar and curator, is demonstrated throughout this 200-page book in which she draws from her expertise across each of these perspectives. Her book is presented as a body of work generated from a love and dedication to the field of screendance and that passionate tone and sense of celebration resounds throughout. Nevertheless, though the title and tone have a timbre of lightness, the book does not hold back from sharp critique, deep questioning and provocations. This results in a deft weave of the author's personal experiences, case studies and a history of film, film festivals and screendance curating.

The author describes the book as “a curatorial memoir with a great deal of context that serves as a platform and an invitation”.<sup>1</sup> The book's first half charts solid contextual information on screendance film history, festivals and curating from which an in-depth examination follows in its second half, with particular consideration given to themes of representation within screendance works and festivals. Opening in the form of a trip down memory lane, chapter one traces the author's “Falling in Love”<sup>2</sup> with screendance and its related genres. We are invited to share in her journey in which childhood viewings of early TV dance classics and explorations of works from directors such as Fellini and Kurosawa provide the grounding in film and dance experience that have framed her relationship to screendance today. This personal account opens out into a wider tracing of the developments of film in the exquisitely detailed follow-on chapter “An Art Worth Celebrating”<sup>3</sup> that introduces the aesthetics and political arguments from early photography to Dadaism and Surrealism. Similarly, a later chapter dedicated to curation gives an equally focused introduction to the history of western curation across centuries. Hagan's book draws on her own experiences with depth as a black artist and curator emphasising screendance's relationship to identity and representation. Indeed my encounter with Hagan's book coincided with the events of the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 2022, when I learned of the reports<sup>4</sup> of the murder of ten black Americans in Buffalo, USA as I sat reading in my home in Ireland.

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## IJSD Volume 13: Choreographing the Archive

Hagan's commitment to foregrounding the realities of marginalised communities seemed, unfortunately as ever, an important vantage point for considering the field of screendance.

*"Segregation, supremacy and discrimination are abundant historically and contemporarily".<sup>5</sup> (Hagan, 2022)*

It is the collection of three chapters in its latter half (9,10,11) that foreground with particular urgency these critical perspectives on identity and representation in screendance and how these circumstances and consequences might impact its curation. Echoing Maria Reilly's own considerations on the concept of "curatorial activism",<sup>6</sup> Hagan positions her curation and that of others as "a practice of awareness-building".<sup>7</sup> Hagan's call for reflection is evident in both her practice as a curator as well as within her writing, tuning to and acting on how we attend to issues of identity within screendance festival contexts. She foregrounds the reality that screendance grapples with "disparities and imbalances"<sup>8</sup> in its festival programming and curation particularly across race, gender, ability and age.

*"White performers have always been over represented as compared to performers of colour with regard to the US population."<sup>9</sup> (2020)*

Needless to say, screendance is not alone here, and the arts more widely grapples with issues of representation both within the ways we enable artists to be present and visible, and how work itself represents. And though these experiences vary in their intensity across different countries within their own histories, the significance of Hagan's account is clear and considerable and of importance within the particularly global experience of screendance.

The author founded American Dance Festival's Movies by Movers festival as "the first black woman to start a Screendance festival in the United States".<sup>10</sup> A detailed examination of this festival is presented over five years, acting "as a research platform to explore issues of representation from the vantage point of the curator".<sup>11</sup> The premise of the chapter is that the disparities and imbalances mentioned above warrant and "demand" examination, attention and active changing. Complimenting this chapter are additional case studies including research conducted within the open submission processes of Outlet Dance Project<sup>12</sup> and The Mobile Dance Film Festival<sup>13</sup>. Collectively this analysis gives strong and clear statistical analysis on representation across those festivals. Through these case studies, the author not only gives examples of the disparities but also the reasons why these might exist. This data mining on issue of representation is a valuable and rare analysis for the field.

The author recognizes how screendance created in America cannot separate itself from its "segregated histories"<sup>14</sup> and her research and US based case studies

weigh in to exemplify this. But this book calls on us all to consider these statistics in relation to our own experiences and biases.

*“If it is the role of the curator to care for the material that constitutes the screendance landscape, it is the duty of the curator to understand the power they possess, to influence the perception audiences have of the works and to influence the trajectory of the field at large.” (2022)*

In Chapter 11 Hagan drills directly into festival models and curation that highlight efforts where approaches to considering diversity are evident. Specifically, she deals with examples of US festivals and their directors and teams actively taking on these challenges. Foregrounding the different scales of festivals, Hagan’s acknowledgment of larger festivals and agencies, whilst highlighting smaller platforms and artist led contexts, is a valuable consideration that echoes her considerations of diversification of programme and approach. By listing her own curatorial goals, Hagan offers clarity and transparency in her approach to festival curating and analysis. Highlighting the concern that *“the perception for many artists of color is that a lot of the festivals and spaces that host festival activities are not spaces for them”*<sup>15</sup>, Hagan calls into question how festivals and programs need to consider not only *what* we curate but *how* we curate. How are a festival’s values evident and when do these become saturated by a plethora of content which might submerge that vital space for considering?

Hagan is equally attentive to questions of gender, age and ability, and these are similarly considered with her festival case-studies research as key concerns for screendance. Dedicated to two artists, Pauline Koner and Kitty Doner, chapter three is a passionate and inspiring contribution to the book that examines modes of dissemination prior to the proliferation of screendance festivals in the 70’s. Highlighting these women as pioneers of dance on television at a time when this field was particularly male dominated their innovative approach was exemplified by their technique of *cameragraphing*<sup>16</sup>. Here they explored key principles relevant to many screendance makers today including screen-space, performance quality on screen and (the less explored) considerations of live editing. The unearthing of these women’s contributions in 2018 via papers from the New York Public Library and the reciprocal contribution to the author’s thinking about dance on screen, comes with an infectious enthusiasm. Through Hagan’s intimacy in detail and celebration of the women via her research, I find myself thrilled and appreciative reading this discovery.

Hagan’s analysis of the historical and contemporary development of screendance festival-making emerges in particular within Chapters 4 & 5 in which she identifies four developmental stages that are broadly delineated by patterns and behaviours. This cumulative picture of the landscape of festival-making supports an understanding of the linear historical timeline, though as the author notes

these are taken mainly from a North American perspective with some interlinking across other continents including South America and Europe. Four generational categories are presented as unfolding since the 1960s; the Preservationists (1969-83), the Delineators (1984-2003), the Hyper-Localists (2003-2016) and the Collectivists, (2016-onward). In summary, each period points to inherent characteristics that might be summarised briefly as: Preserving the genre, defining the genre, the do-it-yourself mentality and digitally enabled festivals, respectively. Delineating these according to time affords an efficient framing for a consideration of screendance development, though I might add that this efficiency may equally be a stumbling block in enabling a considering of the inherent frictions and developments *across* different modes of approach, ethos, scale and the widening of contexts. The inclusion of further categorisation is therefore welcome in Chapter 5, which sets out as an invitation and information hub for enthusiasts, makers, or would-be festival directors. There, five distinct festival identities are presented, drawing from examples of existing festivals: Cinema festivals, Make festivals, Multi-purpose festivals, Itinerant festivals and the increasingly present Online festival, considered within the context of the recent global pandemic.

For Hagan, the Collectivists (the fourth and currently active generational category presented) are “declaring their festivals as sites of curatorial activism and are making decisions based on what they see as the future of screendance”<sup>17</sup>. Though this sentiment is unlikely to be limited to current activism in the field, its value as a call to action for the future is striking. Hagan’s breadth and emphasis on an “active”<sup>18</sup> consideration of curatorial practice is clearly evident and highlighted in the chapters entitled “Curatorial Adventures” and “A Treatise about Curating”. Intentional and active festival curation seems more present and indeed needed in our community as noted by the author. Given the somewhat recent rise in the use of the term curation within dance and screendance contexts, Hagan’s featuring of key terms such as curating and curatorial practice is significant in progressing a dialogue around how festival curation may be considered as a practice in screendance. By applying the term ‘curator’ in relation to the festival examples in the book, Hagan invites a consideration of these activities within the resonances and contexts such terminology invites. Reflecting beyond the book momentarily, if the term ‘curating’ is to be used to define what screendance festivals do, then we must ask in what way the activity of curating and programming have shared qualities and are differentiated. Drawing from curatorship and its richly explored practice stemming largely from the visual arts, resonances are opened up that can invest screendance with wider contexts which may encourage expanding models and approaches to sharing work. Bringing attention and clarity to the meaning of curation in each festival context will bring with it a responsibility and care for the content and its (festival) container and ultimately a widening of screendance’s resonance.

Hagan's soft but assertive tone throughout this book addresses, head-on, key challenges across our current society through the lens of screendance, unequivocally affirming our need for "curatorial activism" in screendance. This is not a time to be passive about our futures<sup>19</sup> and this book and its inevitable ensuing conversations will impact how we sense, feel and activate our curatorial futures in screendance.

## Biography

Mary Wycherley is a freelance dance artist, film director and curator based in Ireland. Supported by the Arts Council of Ireland since 2007 her artistic work is experienced in performance, cinematic and exhibition contexts. It is presented and commissioned both in Ireland and internationally for venues, festivals and galleries. Interdisciplinarity is a key feature in her work, with collaborations connecting widely across a range of artists and contexts. Mary is co-founder and curator of Light Moves Festival since its inception in 2014. She was Limerick Dance Artist in Residence from 2015-2019. Mary founded Studio Light Moves in 2019 as an artist development wing of the festival which currently hosts residencies for dance and digital media research collaborations. Her teaching in dance, film and interdisciplinary creative process spans University level, professional masterclass and individual mentoring contexts. She continues to teach regularly at the University of Limerick where she was Course Director of the MA Contemporary Dance Performance there 2016-18. Recent touring work and commissions include feature length film *In the Bells Shadow* and live dance for gallery *Invisible Histories*, award-winning film *WRoNGHEADED* and a film quintet *Far-Flung Dances*. Currently Mary is creating *Weathering*, a live cinema work and she is completing a PhD at the Centre for Dance Research (C-DaRE) at Coventry University.

Email: [Lightmovesfestival@gmail.com](mailto:Lightmovesfestival@gmail.com)

Websites: [www.marywycherley.com](http://www.marywycherley.com) [www.lightmoves.ie](http://www.lightmoves.ie)

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1 Hagan, 2022: 1

2 Ibid. 3

## IJSD Volume 13: Choreographing the Archive

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- 3 Ibid. 13
  - 4 <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/05/14/nyregion/buffalo-shooting>
  - 5 Hagan, 128
  - 6 Reilly, Maura. *Curatorial Activism Towards an Ethics of Curating*, 16
  - 7 Hagan, 120
  - 8 Ibid. 122
  - 9 Ibid. 130
  - 10 Ibid. 52
  - 11 Ibid. 122
  - 12 <https://www.theoutletdanceproject.com>
  - 13 <https://www.mobiledancefilmfestival.com>
  - 14 Hagan, 134
  - 15 Ibid. 132
  - 16 Ibid. 37
  - 17 Ibid. 45
  - 18 Ibid. 90
  - 19 See Monfort, Nick. *The Future*. Chapter 9 Practices of Future-Making