

Dance on Camera at 45

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Dance Films Association hosted its 45th annual Dance on Camera festival in New York City in January of 2017. This festival has changed curators and partnerships over the years, and the organization's mission has expanded to include offering grants, building an archive of dance films, and hosting training sessions and workshops. This year, an Emerging Movement Summit accompanied the festival as a way to open the conversation up to new technologies and university curricula. What is sometimes called dance-technology has had a muted presence in the United States in recent years, and it was gratifying to see a possible reemergence of this field alongside and in relation to screendance.

The Dance on Camera festival has been co-presented by the Film Society of Lincoln Center since 1996, and this venue surely has an impact on the curatorial perspective as well as clientele. While the festival makes a space for experimental dance and experimental filmmaking, these are not where the festival earns its bread and butter. Instead, documentary films dominated the festival. And while all of the screenings were well-attended, the auditorium filled to overflowing for films that focused on ballet or uptown modern dance.

Balletomanes were thus well-cared for with highly personal documentary films. *Looking at the Stars* featured Geyza Pereira of the São Paulo school and company Fernanda Bianchini Ballet Association for the Blind. Both practical and idealistic, Pereira comments of herself and fellow visually impaired dancers, "We like to be inspirational, but you can't build a future on that."¹ *Anatomy of a Male Ballet Dancer* followed New York's adopted son American Ballet Theatre dancer Marcelo Gomes as he reminisces about his childhood and early training and struggles with injury. Attempts to make Gomes relatable resulted in belabored daddy issues, but footage of Gomes performing was truly remarkable. *Marie's Attitude* was too long, but the film's subject, Marie Lindqvist, principal dancer with the Royal Swedish Ballet, appeared a masterful dancer and a grounded yet delightful individual. Filmmaker Kersti Grunditz Brennan was also gratifyingly adventurous in her construction of this film, cutting between rehearsal and performance footage and shooting rehearsals in a manner more familiar in experimental films than documentary. *Queen of Thursdays* makes footage of Rosario Suárez, former prima ballerina of the Nacional Ballet de Cuba,

available to audiences for the first time. This intimate film walks viewers through troubles with the famous, and famously jealous, Alicia Alonso, and life as a Cuban exile in Miami. Additional feature-length documentaries included *Dancing Beethoven* (*Beethoven par Béjart*), the swing-dance themed *Alive & Kicking*, the troubling portrait *Storyboard P, a Stranger in Sweden*, *In the Steps of Trisha Brown* (*Dans les pas de Trisha Brown*), as well as surprisingly moving *Into Sunlight*, which follows choreographer Robin Becker and her dancers creating a new work about war, built from David Maraniss's book *They Marched into Sunlight*. Made for the novice dance viewer, *Into Sunlight* was very much a didactic film, skillfully teaching viewers how to watch and interpret dance. It should appear on any university Dance Appreciation syllabus.

The festival sought a global reach in its offerings, for which I applaud the curators. However, that very globality was heavily filtered through the lenses of ballet and documentary, which misrepresents the diversity of contemporary screendance. In contrast, the short films screened across the festival leaned distinctly in the direction of the United States, and even more distinctly in the direction of New York. Nevertheless, the curators are balancing the needs of distinct interest groups. Without the ballet-hungry and docu-curious, there might not be a strong-enough base of support to continue other aspects of the festival's programming, namely the screening of short films and historical works, which also require local support.

Film shorts accompanied feature-length presentations, exposing audiences to additional artists and dance styles. These were quite strong—*Broken Memory*, *Being and Nothingness*, *349* and *Exquisite Corps*, among them. Although the filmmakers introduced their short films, they were not included in the talk-backs, so there was no formal venue for interacting with the filmmakers if they were not on one of the two shorts programs. Since many screendance festivals consist almost entirely of short films, this seemed to me to be quite a slight for the filmmakers—some of whom traveled no small distance to introduce their films.

There were two shorts programs gathered under the themes of "narrative" and "experimental." Many films on the "narrative" program were baffling in their immaturity. Only two films reflected the prestige of the venue, presenting both aesthetic clarity and emotional weight: *Color of Reality* and *You*.

Color of Reality was truly astonishing and devastating. Walls, furniture, and the dancers themselves—director Jon Boogz and Lil Buck—have been painted over in Alexa Meade's impressionistic brush strokes that transform an ordinary living room scene to a magical space. In one particularly moving moment, heavy with the anti-black violence depicted on television, Lil Buck balances on his toes, reaches toward his heart with both hands, and, as if ripping it out of his chest and throwing it to the ground, he tramples it with his footwork.

You is an excerpt of the late British choreographer Nigel Charnock's 1991 solo work *Resurrection*, staged for camera. Directed by Graham Clayton-Chance and performed by Dan Watson, the video is part of a larger project of archiving Charnock's performance work. Shot in a simple rehearsal studio, Watson performs Charnock's characteristic dance-theater combinations of rhythmic speech with calibrated, repeating gestures structured by the lyricism of his prose. "You want someone to take you away from all this—to take you away from all this. Someone to come and make things different. Someone with answers. Someone who will make you whole. Someone who will make you complete. Someone to take you away from all this. Somebody to take you away from all this."²

Both films, the first an original creation and the second an adaptation, find tenderness inside of a fraught moment in history. While anti-gay violence and the AIDS epidemic may have faded somewhat from the collective memory of the LGBTQ community as a long-ago nightmare, the radicalism of staging pride and pleasure in gay male sexual identity in 1991 would have read as a strong political statement. So too does an affirmation of black masculinity against the backdrop of contemporary anti-black violence and the Black Lives Matter social movement. Where Charnock's soliloquy locates the agency of transformation in another individual—the one desired, the one who will change things—*Color of Reality* implicates viewers in the deaths of the main characters. Jon Boogz and Lil Buck do not seek somebody to intervene in a violent social landscape that produces life always at the edge of death; they seek somebodies. It remains to be seen who will answer their call.

The second "experimental" shorts program productively challenged the limits of dance onscreen. Kathy Rose's wonderfully bizarre *The Unpainted Woman* (2016) took viewers on a posthuman science-fiction underwater tour, while other films experimented with uses of technology, including drone-mounted cameras and motion capture animations. The program concluded with Eiko's film *A Body in the East Village* (2016), which is part of her much larger project *A Body in Places*. Organized under the rubric of experimentation, this program begs the question of what it means to be experimental, whether the focus is technological, aesthetic, political, or something else. Perhaps experimentation is simply a way to describe illegibility and ambiguity in an era that demands transparency of meaning.

The most daring—and perhaps most significant—achievement of the 2017 Dance on Camera Festival was the Tribute to David Gordon, featuring *Punch and Judy Get Divorced* (1992) and *My Folks* (1989), with a post-screening conversation with Gordon and Valda Setterfield. The presentation was in conjunction with the New York Public Library's installation *David Gordon: Archiveography—Under Construction*. Like so many movement artists, Gordon has set about constructing an online archive of recorded performance work, photographs, and writing—available at <http://davidgordon.nyc/>. The films screened represent two poles of Gordon's work, from the carefully

choreographed investigation of identity and heritage in *My Folks* to the uproarious chaos of *Punch and Judy Get Divorced*. Though small compared to other audiences, those who stayed for the talk-back were awed by Gordon's achievements and took away a real sense of the history of postmodern dance and dance onscreen. This sense of history and the festival's commitment to that history was further bolstered by the screening of a re-mastered version of Merce Cunningham's *Crises* (1961) and the classic film by Peter Glushanok of Martha Graham in *A Dancer's World* (1957).

The format of the Dance on Camera Festival has continued to mature with age, and the festival is managing to balance competing interests as they assemble films and experiences that appeal to the widest possible audience, including both the academically inclined and dance fans. Dance onscreen has long been dominated by artists in North America, the United Kingdom, and Europe, but the balance has shifted in the past decade or more. In an era of increasing nationalism and xenophobia, I hope that festivals such as Dance on Camera find the political will to use their prestige to highlight the best new work from around the world. The screendance field can only benefit from participating in the screening and circulation of films that challenge audiences to see differently, whether because they refer to unfamiliar movement vocabularies, cultural frameworks, or systems of aesthetic value. After 45 years of continuous programming, audiences should be able to expect both greater variety and greater challenge from the dance films produced and screened in such venues.

Biography

Harmony Bench is Assistant Professor of Dance at The Ohio State University, where she is affiliated faculty with Theatre; Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; and Translational Data Analytics. She co-edits *The International Journal of Screendance* with Simon Ellis. She is currently working on a database of early 20th century touring dance companies and, with Kate Elswit, exploring the touring and travel of choreographer Katherine Dunham. These projects in progress can be found at [Movement on the Move](#).

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Notes

- ¹ *Looking at the Stars*, Peralta.
- ² *You*, Clayton-Chance.

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