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Dance Camera West

Harold M. Williams Auditorium, The Getty Center
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Reviewed by Sara Wolf

There's a scene in choreographer Victoria Marks's and director Margaret Williams's dance film *Men* that begins with a tender, gestural duet between two of the film's octogenarian companions. The camera pulls back to reveal a third elder conducting the cautiously close moment, then follows as he turns to face—and conduct—the Canadian Rockies. The visual sweep—from close-up to awe-inspiring grandeur—is breathtaking. So, too, is the dramatic sweep, which takes a familiar theme of Marks's—the fumbling awkwardness of human intimacy—and adds to it a poignantly realized statement about the male drive to conquer and command, even in the face of impending mortality.

Among the least movement-oriented of the fourteen films screened at Dance Camera West, Los Angeles's first dance film and video festival, *Men* nevertheless captures some of the best qualities of this hybrid medium and the pleasures of watching it. Founded and directed by Kelly Hargraves and Lynette Kessler, the nonjuried festival introduced audiences to dance film (or screen dance, or dance media, or whatever you want to call it) with a broad selection of similar award winners culled from international festivals, including Laura Taler's *A Very Dangerous Pastime* and Hans Beenhaaker's *Wiped*, winners of the 2001 and 2002 Dance on Camera "Best of Festival" awards, respectively.

Taler's witty guide to understanding contemporary dance opened each evening by reminding audiences that with dance, anything can happen—an apt warning, given that dancers in most festival selections (including Taler's other contribution, the impressive *A Village Trilogy*) tended to exist a step apart from their environments and, often reality. In the charming, comical quartet of short films, *Modern Daydreams*, filmmaker Mitchell Rose resolved this dilemma by creating a Walter Mitty-like character whose waking dream life animated coworkers, strangers, and farm machinery.

Pascal Magnin used regional folklore to toy with realism in *Reines d'un Jour*, a playful and haunting fable set in the Alps, at odds with the darkly violent urban cityscape of the Swiss filmmaker's other entry, *Contrecoup*, created just a year later. But the constraints of environmental and social codes burst open altogether in choreographer-director Shona McCullagh's absurdist, nuns-on-the-run *Hurtle* and Annick Vroom's and the Hans Hof Ensemble's *Rest in Peace*, in which a family's grieving dissolves into anarchic behavior.

Forgoing narrative altogether was the quiet and sophisticated short *Measure*, one of the festival's strongest entries, from Dayna and Gaelen Hanson (of the Seattle-based company 33 Fainting Spells). Here, as in Michael Downing's *Cornered*, the dancing, whether a sublime tap duet or head-banging hyperdance, was the sole focus, illuminated to wonderful effect through inventive—and in the case of *Cornered*, perspective-altering—editing.

As with dance for the concert stage, films built on thin premises grew tiresome and mediocre choreography remained mediocre. Luckily, these were few in number, and only one entry, the overwrought, special-effects-laden *Anima*, was jarringly out of sync with the overall caliber of the festival. That this was the only premiere of the festival was unfortunate; that it was a project on which DCW co-director Kessler collaborated speaks to a credibility gap that she and Hargraves will need to address if dance film is to flourish in the heart of the Hollywood Dream Machine.