

ETOILES: DANCERS OF THE PARIS OPERA BALLET

***1/2

Starring [the Paris Opera Ballet](#). Directed, written and narrated by Nils Tavernier. Produced by Frederic Bourboulon and Agathe Berman. A First Run release. Documentary. French-language; subtitled. Unrated. Running time: 97 min.

Members of the prestigious Paris Opera Ballet grope for the proper words to describe what dance means to them--"passion," "obsession," "stronger than love," "devouring," "like a drug"--but nothing is quite adequate. In the absorbing and perceptive "Etoiles (The Stars): Dancers of the Paris Opera Ballet," director Nils Tavernier (son of famed critic-turned-director Bertrand Tavernier) pushes back the veil on the insular, arduous, unrelenting yet always mesmerizing world of a ballet troupe, revealing, in part, the powerful allure of dance.

Having filmed the world-famous Paris Opera Ballet for three months in 1999, Tavernier combines interviews with dancers (from stars to principle dancers to understudies and students), choreographers, teachers and directors with filmed rehearsals and adroitly placed black and white stills to unlock the mystery behind a brutal profession dedicated to the creation of beauty and perfection.

It is the latter that the first half of the film explores in an informal manner. In a rigorous program that features both classical and modern pieces ("Swan Lake" and "La Sylphide" alongside "Ninth Symphony" and "Orison"), the dancers, all weirdly striking in their individuality and uniformity, admit that the demands of their work shut out any real possibility of anything else in their lives. A few express misgivings, others absolute certainty that the sacrifices they must make and the discipline required to survive the grueling physical toll is worth it to be a part of this fierce competition that spares neither mind nor body.

While this echoes many explorations of the world of performing arts, what brings refreshing awareness to "Etoile" is Tavernier's feel for the power of images. One of the most pleasing and amusingly revealing is a shot of the feet of women on point, flawlessly alike, moving back and forth like rhythmic sea tides. More than words, images like these emphasize the

unusual camaraderie and isolation of the life of a professional ballet dancer. Likewise, Tavernier's framing of graceful, sinewy strength bring to mind the paintings and bronze work of Degas.

Although Tavernier doesn't over-personalize the dancers, as the film develops, he allows just enough bits and pieces of their outside lives in to add color and dimension to their identities. One young dancer shyly admits to no regrets in leaving the company because she has discovered she and her husband are going to have a baby. Another acknowledges the issue of her mother being a former principle dancer. There are the usual revelations of injuries and the great fears of life after dance, but Tavernier doesn't sentimentalize these confessions. They are merely part of the whole.

Part of the draw of dance is the impossibility to define its particular joy. Tavernier's film conveys a large element of its appeal--and more. One dancer wonders if the enormous effort, sacrifice, fleeting performances and fragile relationships are real life. This captivating presentation says "oui."

Luisa F. Ribeiro

[Be the First to Review](#) **ETOILES: DANCERS OF THE PARIS OPERA BALLET**
