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DANCE

Through the camera eye

Dance Camera West presents a provocative collaboration of lens and body.

By Lewis Segal, Times Staff Writer

After establishing itself last year as a small-scale museum event, the Dance Camera West festival is busting out of its sprockets all over the city this month. As before, programs of short dance-as-film collaborations will be shown at the Getty Center, kicking off the festival on Friday. But this year, full-length documentaries and satellite screenings now vary the menu in engagements scheduled through May 27 in Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Santa Monica and West L.A.

In the short film category, where the idea is to make the camera crucial to the dance, there are entries on the two Getty programs from 13 choreographer-filmmaker combos, highlighting movement styles from traditional African to Japanese butoh, with plenty of Euro-American modernism on view. The dance documentaries are mostly journalistic, not filmed dance but films about dance. Which means that what is missing from the festival is that in-between ground: the enlightened adapted-to-film versions of theater choreography that enrich European television and still dominate the PBS "Dance in America" series.

Even when a film in the festival focuses on a project created for the stage — as in Mirra Bank's fascinating documentary "The Last Dance" — we end up watching only dance snippets: the filmmaker's favorite passages. Bank shoots dance beautifully, and the project she documents takes the reliably daring Pilobolus Dance Theater into unusually deep thematic waters. But she allows us to see the result only in relation to the often conflicting aims of the collaborators: the Pilobolus directors and author-illustrator Maurice Sendak. We are never permitted to view "A Selection" as a whole and judge this ambitious dance drama for ourselves.

Working from their own artistic perspectives, Pilobolus and Sendak wanted to convey the horror of Nazism, a need that also brought into creation arguably the most important film of the festival: Annette von Wangenheim's chilling German-language documentary "Dance Under the Swastika." Using an array of historical footage as well as contemporary interviews, Wangenheim exposes the moral paralysis, hypocrisy and outright profiteering of the German dance community under Hitler. Showing how major and minor artists dealt with the political and artistic realities facing them, she raises questions about artistic responsibility that resonate just as strongly today as they did during the Third Reich.

Such legendary modern dance pioneers as Mary Wigman and Rudolf von Laban, for instance, are depicted as embracing Nazism as long as it served their career ambitions and only rejecting it after the regime dumped them. Others, such as choreographer Kurt Jooss ("The Green Table"), did the right thing even when it cost them everything.

Questions of conscience and responsibility also underpin the big discovery among the pure-dance films in the festival: the nearly hourlong Irish feature "Hit and Run." The title describes the assaultive style prioritized by choreographer David Bolger and director John Comiskey. But their downbeat narrative might better be called "I Know What You Danced Last Summer," since it involves a group of young people recklessly partying their way toward murder.

The changing moods, energies and relationships within a number of atmospheric locations inside an abandoned warehouse emerge with great clarity and force through the skill of eight dancers and a state-of-the-art anthology of choreographic and filmic techniques. Indeed, the length, scale and sheer professionalism of the project make many of the other short festival offerings look like student films.

Film audiences may well appreciate the way dance movement becomes deliberately blurred or splintered in a number of the festival shorts. However, dance aficionados will probably prefer those efforts that supply distinguished performances no matter what the camera is doing — for instance, dancing wonder-woman Caroline Richardson in Kathy Prosser's "Horses Never Lie." Alternately wet and dusty, Richardson anchors the flamboyant shifts in camera angle and location in this six-minute film with great authority. The solo and group choreography by Heddy Maalem in the 26-minute "Black Spring" achieves the same fierce impact. But it takes far too long to divine director Benoit Dervaux's larger purpose: suggesting how the deplorable living conditions in contemporary Africa inspire people to release every emotion, every hope, everything they are or might be into their dancing.

Perhaps the biggest disappointment of the festival this year is Nils Tavernier's documentary "Etoiles: Dancers of the Paris Opera Ballet," which buries intriguing statements about the isolation of a dancer's life in 100 minutes of company puffery and badly shot rehearsal sequences. Audiences who don't mind watching interviews with too many unidentified dancers — or being allowed to glimpse George Balanchine's masterpiece "Apollo" for only 15 seconds — may enjoy playing backstage voyeur here. Others will stroll away as quickly as choreographer Maurice Béjart does in the film after being asked the plot of his plotless "Ninth Symphony."

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Highlights of the festival

"Hit and Run," "Horses Never Lie": Harold M. Williams Auditorium, Getty Center, 1200 Getty Center Drive, Los Angeles. Friday, 7:30 p.m. Free. Parking \$5 (reservations necessary). (310) 440-7300.

"The Last Dance": American Cinematheque at the Egyptian Theatre, 6712 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood. Friday-May 11. (323) 466-3456. \$6 to \$9.

"Dance Under the Swastika": Skirball Cultural Center, 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles. May 18, 7:30 p.m. \$6 to \$8. (323) 655-8587.

For full festival schedule: www.dancecamerawest.org

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