



Dance Review: Dance on Film

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By

ALLAN ULRICH

allan@voiceofdance.com

Nils Tavernier's film Etoiles: Dancers of the Paris Opera Ballet

You may have noticed that the movies are full of dancing these days. The good news is that it's not mere dancing as frills, diversion or filler; it's dancing as a vital means of negotiating one's perilous way through life. First, there are a select group of documentaries in limited release. Then, there are two narrative movies that are virtually inescapable. Rob Marshall's *Chicago* has been nominated for 13 Academy Awards and Pedro Almodóvar's highly imaginative romantic fantasy, *Talk to Her*, is a multiple nominee, too. Neither is an ordinary dance movie.

Both tell us that dance is a language capable of expressing what mere words cannot - an ancient conceit, I will grant, but endowed with significance, joy and even a kind of ecstasy in these movies. Almodóvar begins his film with his two male protagonists, then unknown to each other, watching Pina Bausch perform in her grim, combative *Café Müller*. It closes with a performance of Bausch's lighter *Masurca Fogo*, a tribute to Portugal. At the opening, tears pour down one of our protagonist's cheeks (anybody who has seen Bausch in *Café Müller* will wonder: its violent encounters are not the kind that generate weeping). The fellow with the active tear ducts cannot express his feelings here, and the other principal character will shortly fall in love with a ballerina in a coma, another example of overt non-communication. The movie also features a delectable impersonation, by Geraldine Chaplin, of a Martha Graham-like choreographer. *Chicago* is something else - the most successful movie musical in many years. Marshall has far surpassed the knock-off Bob Fosse choreography that Ann Reinking furnished for the famed stage revival of the Kander and Ebb musical. Those dances were functional at best. On the screen, dance consistently proposes metaphors for ordinary behavior. There's a great moment here when the shady defense lawyer is said to tapdance around an interrogation, and Marshall inserts a scene in which the lawyer, Richard Gere, actually launches into such a number.

Best of all, Marshall accepts the unreality of the genre. The production numbers, among which can be spotted the great Desmond Richardson, look deliberately stagey at times - underlining the movie's theme, that we are what we present to the public. That's how Roxie Hart manages to squeeze out of a murder charge, by creating a fictional image of

herself. True, Marshall doesn't always respect the architecture of the body in his camera set-ups (feet are often cut off). Yet, Chicago is alive in a way that movie musicals have not been in many years. Given that Hollywood is always desperate to repeat a success, we may expect a spate of dancing musicals on celluloid in the years to come. The prospect is exciting.

Dance documentaries on film, however, don't reap such handsome profits; if they are lucky enough to get a commercial run, the runs are limited and, maybe, they will become available on video or DVD. That means, you will have to run to catch the fascinating *Etoiles: Dancers of the Paris Opera Ballet* if it arrives in your city. The movie opens a week's run Friday (Feb. 21) in San Francisco.

The film, written, narrated and directed by Nils Tavernier (son of famed director Bertrand), begins with a recitation of statistics - how you get into the Paris Opera Ballet School, how you move up to the parent company, how long your career lasts, where you perform (mostly in the gorgeous Second Empire Palais Garnier), why it is all so hierarchical. The original title of the film is *Tous près des Etoiles* (close up to the stars) - *Etoile* being the highest designation the POB allots its dancers, much like a glorified principal in this country. Then, the movie, which came out in 2001, accompanies the troupe on a tour of Japan.

These are some of the greatest ballet dancers of our time; many of them prove extraordinarily articulate about why they dance. Off camera, Tavernier interviews such luminaries as Laurent Hilaire, Manuel Legris (POB's durable danseur noble) Nicholas LeRiche, Agnès Letestu, Aurélie Dupont, Marie-Agnès Gillot, Wilfried Romoli and Elisabeth Platel, whose farewell performance after 24 years is filmed. We meet, also, the choreographers Maurice Béjart and Jiri Kylian. The head of POB, Brigitte Lefèvre, talks about the company; so does the school chief, Claude Bessy. More touching are the presences of Noëlla Pontois and the still elegant Ghislaine Thesmar, *étoiles* of yesteryear. They explain why dancers drive their bodies so mercilessly when their careers are so short and why their final bows are often so poignant.

Tavernier also checks in with hopeful members of the corps and scrutinizes the rigors of the classroom. Performance footage of Pierre Lacotte's *La Sylphide*, Béjart's setting of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (in the congress center in Bercy) and works by Kylian, and Pierre Darde whet the appetite for more. In the eyes of many critics and company directors, POB is the greatest classical company in the world right now and this movie tells you how it got that way - through a strict adherence to tradition.

Still, time has a way of catching up with documentaries; *Etoile* was shot over a three-month period in 1999. Last fall, the French press rocked with charges that POB regularly abused its students; law suits were filed against the directors and instructors. None of that scandal surfaces here in these astonishing portraits of artistic dedication.

A documentary that may be harder to find in your city, but worth searching out is Jocelyn Ajami's marvelous *Queen of the Gypsies*. The Boston-based filmmaker has given the

world the first American feature documentary on the legendary Spanish dancer, Carmen Amaya, who rose from poverty in Barcelona and died tragically young, at 50, in 1963. Amaya was an elemental flamenco artist, and in her own way, a feminist, adopting slacks in her dancing appearances and specializing in dynamic footwork, once deemed a male prerogative.

The historic footage is terrific, though Ajami often cuts away too soon and the interviews with Amaya's family are intensely touching. Flamenco is nothing without music, and Amaya was fortunate to collaborate with the gypsy guitarist Sabicas, whose presence in this film is considerable, if not downright unforgettable.

Etoiles: Dancers of the Paris Opera Ballet shows Friday, Feb. 21-Thursday, Feb. 27 at the Opera Plaza Cinema, 601 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco. For more information and to purchase Queen of the Gypsies, go to Gypsy Heart Productions.

The views of Allan Ulrich are not necessarily the views of Voice of Dance