

Film festival shows how camera adds a new dimension to dance

Daily Breeze - Torrance, Calif.

Author: MELISSA HECKSCHER * RAVE!

Date: Jun 2, 2006

Start Page: R.10

Text Word Count: 581

Document Text

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What is dance, exactly?

Is it two people gliding across a ballroom or a ballerina whirling under a spotlight? Is it a do-si-do and a one-two-three, a step to the right and a step to the left?

Or is it mere movement? Shapes and shadows tangling together, lines and figures moving in a way that seems deliberate, yet graceful?

All of the above, say the people behind the Dance Camera West, Los Angeles Dance Film Festival, a monthlong showcase of international dance films that starts tonight at the REDCAT in the Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles.

"No longer do you have to use the whole body and face; you can focus on a particular body part. An elbow, the crook of the arm, can fill the whole screen and it can be the most incredible form," said Lynette Kessler, the festival's executive and artistic director.

"The terrain of the body in isolation is very intriguing."

The Dance Camera West festival launched in 2002 as a special program hosted by the Getty Center. It since has evolved into a citywide event showcasing 50 films from 27 countries. This year's lineup includes films of various lengths and forms, from three-minute shorts to full-length features.

As opposed to dance on stage, dance films combine the physicality of movement and dance with the open possibilities of film.

"This is dance that's specifically made to be seen on screen," said Kessler, a dancer

and choreographer. "It's where cinematography and choreography meet."

The films include a variety of dance forms, from tango and tap to modern dance and martial arts. Choreographers use cinematic tools such as slow-motion, special effects and unusual camera angles.

In one film, the background behind a single dancer changes to the rhythm of the music. In another, only the feet are shown tapping and sliding on a bare warehouse floor. Another features silhouetted figures atop slowly moving cranes.

"Dance made for the stage is shown in one dimension for the front-viewing audience," Kessler said. "Dance made for the screen can take you anywhere from any location -- from a rooftop to a railroad car to underwater. ... You give a choreographer a camera and they immediately go somewhere. We get films in shopping malls, we get films at airports, subway systems, bedrooms, everywhere imaginable."

Though still a relatively new genre in the United States, dance films have been a part of the international arts scene for several decades, particularly in Europe and Canada.

Of the 50 films chosen to premiere at Dance Camera West, only three are American-made.

"The European artists have funding mechanisms. The work is far more developed in other countries than it is here," Kessler said. "Even in South America the films are low production value and still they are aesthetically far more sophisticated than they are here -- these are cultures that have art in their daily lives."

Dance Camera West is one of several such festivals in the U.S., the biggest of its kind being the annual Dance on Camera Film Festival at the Lincoln Center in New York, which took place in January.

Dance Camera West films are shown at various Los Angeles-area locations. In addition to the REDCAT, screenings are being presented at UCLA's Hammer Museum in Westwood and at the Max Palevsky Theatre at the Aero in Santa Monica.

Several films will premiere each night of the festival. In addition, open discussions and live performances are scheduled throughout the month.

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