

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

On Film, the Dance Hidden in Hands, Poetry and Parkinson's

Dance on Camera Festival at Lincoln Center



A scene from "Let's Get the Rhythm."
IRENE CHAGALL

By GIA KOURLAS

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It's time for a new kind of dance film, one that forces you to see the art form differently, that even makes you breathe a little differently. This season's Dance on Camera festival, now in its 43rd year, presents several unconventional offerings that aim spotlights at the choreographic rigor of hand-clapping games and competitive cheerleading or reveal how Parkinson's patients can dance with hypnotic purity.

The genre needs directors who are willing to look beneath the surface and to dream, as Lily Baldwin does in her adroit, wry short, "[A Juice Box Afternoon](#)." A young woman, sitting on the sidewalk in a yellow chair, reads an old paperback. "Everything today has been heavy and brown," a voice-over recites. "Bring me a unicorn to" — she pauses slightly, choking on a giggle — "ride about the town?" When the scene cuts to the woman, now in an airy pink dress lurching and swaying

in slow motion to K.Flay's propulsive, raw track "Sunburn," it's as if her mind has been set free.

That verse by Anne Morrow Lindbergh comes to life as the notion of flight — physical and emotional — takes shape in a sensual, choreographic mingling of words and a buoyant body. At first you don't realize you're looking at a dance; suddenly, there it is.

Included in the festival, organized by the Film Society of Lincoln Center and Dance Films Association, "A Juice Box Afternoon" is the first installment of Ms. Baldwin's "Paperback Movie Project," in which each short examines the relationship between a reader and the characters in her book.



David Leventhal with Parkinson's patients in the film "Capturing Grace."
EDDIE MARRITZ

The offbeat approach continues with the excellent documentary "[Let's Get the Rhythm: The Life and Times of Miss Mary Mack](#)," in which the first-time filmmaker Irene Chagall explores the hand-clapping games girls play the world over. Again, it's a case of choreography happening where you least expect it. Identifiable to players by their opening words ("Rockin' Robin" or "Miss Mary Mack"), the games survive as an oral tradition."

The part I find fascinating is that there's something joyful in this kind of movement," Ms. Chagall said in a telephone interview. "When I think back about how I felt when I played these games as a child, I was in the zone. I wasn't rigid. It involved my whole body."

The film, which features interviews with young girls, also accomplishes something else with its choreographic pulse: As it swings between games and interviews, “Let’s Get the Rhythm” has a beat; its incandescent musicality brings this hand-clapping universe to life.

The idea of observing the way choreography flourishes within a group is an indirect through-line of the festival, notably in “[Capturing Grace](#),” which focuses on the Mark Morris Dance Group’s work with Parkinson’s patients, and “American Cheerleader,” a strangely poignant look at two teams as they compete in a national championship.



Lily Baldwin in her film, “A Juice Box Afternoon.”
BEN WOLF

“Capturing Grace,” directed by David Iverson, follows members of the Brooklyn Parkinson Group as they attend dance classes at the Mark Morris Dance Center and prepare, under the supervision of David Leventhal and John Heginbotham, for a performance. “The dancing part of this isn’t a miracle and it’s not a treatment, but I also see this amazing thing of the people who come into the building one way and leave another,” Mr. Morris says in the film. “And I don’t mean by a different door, I mean they’ve been transformed in a certain way.”

It’s moving to witness the power of choreography — the way tremors recede in the studio, the way the performers rediscover what they thought they had lost — but to

Mr. Iverson's credit, the bravery of the participants is neither sensationalized nor sugarcoated, even when what they're sharing is nothing short of remarkable. As Cyndy Gilbertson, a retired social worker in the class, notes, "I sometimes cannot walk, but I can dance."

In "[American Cheerleader](#)," the filmmakers James Pellerito and David Barba — they're currently working on a documentary about the ballet dancer Marcelo Gomes — focus on teams from New Jersey and Kentucky. Through extensive practice footage, the film shows the technical and athletic prowess required to pull off such complex formations; in the end, cheerleading comes across like any performing art, and the stories of the coaches and cheerleaders are just as gripping. "What ended up happening is, I think we made the real 'Bring It On,'" Mr. Pellerito said in an interview, "which is kind of shocking."

Most unusual is "[The Dance of the Sun](#)," directed by Ami Skanberg Dahlstedt and Folke Johansson, which, like a travelogue, explores Japanese dance through the eyes and body of a Swedish choreographer. Ms. Dahlstedt takes a Japanese legend as her point of departure: The sun goddess hides in a cave, rendering the world dark, until the goddess of laughter draws her out with dancing, and lightness returns.



Ami Skanberg Dahlstedt in "The Dance of the Sun."
KYOTO ART CENTER

Ms. Dahlstedt, our guide, reveals that she has traveled to Kyoto seven times where she worked extensively with her sensei, Nishikawa Senrei, who is featured in the film, but has since died. In it, Ms. Dahlstedt explores different styles of Japanese

dance and visits contemporary dancers. Her blond bangs are offset by ropy orange braids; it's all part of her costume.

"I'm Swedish, and what right do I have to portray Japan like this?" she said. "It's me, but it's kind of an enhanced me. I come to Japan to learn, and these braids in my hair connect to a figure that I love, [Pippi Longstocking](#). I thought, if I'm going to portray Japanese dance, I also wanted to have some Swedishness in my character."

Her journey will continue in New York, where she'll appear at the screening on Monday and enact on the streets of New York the same slow-walking practice, or suriashi, that is documented in the film. From Sunday through Tuesday, she plans to cover Times Square, [Grand Central Terminal](#) and the area around Judson Memorial Church.

With a laugh, she said, "The new Swedish tourist attraction: slow walking."



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