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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Liz Goldberg

It's the Stringing It Together That Counts: Philadelphia Dance Projects Motion Pictures Shorts Fest 2011

by Christina Gesualdi

On October 6th, 2011, Philadelphia Dance Projects presented Shorts Fest, a group of wildly different dance films, for this year's 10th annual Motion Pictures series. Terry Fox and Gretjen Clausen successfully sequenced the wide range of films: political, fleeting, hypnotic, hip, amusing, ironic, whimsical, and conceptually experimental. We can blame our culture of online video dissemination for such poor attendance at this event. Still, an at-home youtube.com viewing cannot compare to the remarkable journey strung together by the curators.

Shorts Fest began with Karen Warrington's documentary, Precious Places "711", part of Scribe Video's city-wide oral history project. Warrington honed in on the "black dancing school" in Philadelphia, urging the necessity of its preservation through historical documentation. Scrapbook-like, the film combined interviews (with Joan Myers Brown and other black dance pioneers), photos, and footage from amateur and professional dance classes and performances from the mid 1900's to the current day. It portrayed nostalgia shadowed by discrimination and segregation faced by the black dance community. This film exemplified dance films' potential to track history's winding and often unjust trajectories.

Liz Goldberg and Warren Bass's animation, [Strings](#), inspired curiosity, sweeping me up in its rolling drumbeat. Goldberg rendered chunky black lines into scribbled knots. Squiggles intertwined, transforming into upright zebra-like characters who traipsed in place. With the speed of a gallop and the clomping strut of an inexperienced diva, these creatures, accessorized in heels and splotches of watercolor, recalled both the hustle and bustle of the city and the boldness of the wild. They evolved and soon appeared as humans: a bullfighter, tango dancer, and drummer. The tone transitioned from light-hearted to ambiguously violent. Before I could process the flashes of darkness and crashing sounds, the chaos abruptly ended – no strings attached.

The theme of strings continued in [Loom](#). The motif of a string, red and threaded through a needle, literally stitched photographed images of a man and woman into three-dimensional transitions. The director and performer, Katie Faulkner, performed other absurd but striking arts and craft tasks -- the most beautifully bizarre example showed the duet standing on a rooftop, running the thread through each others' garments, creating lines of pull, as if a multi-directional wind had blown just the edge of her skirt and the sleeve of his jacket. The camera framed this "thread-dance" and then fast-forwarded as extras zipped across the roof with needles and thread, adding both complexity to the image and challenge to the duet's physicality. Throughout the nine-minute film, the dancers often stood side-by-side with idiosyncratic, yet angular, postures and wide-eyed gazes.

Plunging me into the deep end of the evening, [Deep End Dance](#) began with a poolside shot that panned its way over to Ireland's Michael Bolger and his grey-haired mother. In an endearing moment, she put nose plugs on him, placed her hand lovingly on his chest, and then gave him a swift push, sending him plummeting into the pool. A splash, a pregnant pause, a switch to an underwater camera angle -- as Bolger descended, Michael Fleming's melodic score created immediate whimsy. As if in a dream, Bolger flipped, spun, and kicked like a suit-donning Billy Elliot. Every now and then, the camera angle switched, and I was surprised to see Bolger's mother watching from above. She entered the pool; Bolger and she slow danced horizontally, like a mother and son might at an underwater wedding. Deep End Dance offered a sensory experience that helped me reflect on Shorts Fest with heightened clarity. Submerged for such a long time, Bolger didn't need to surface for a breath and neither did I.

Shorts Fest 2011, part of [Philadelphia Dance Project's Motion Pictures Dance on Film and Video](#), The Performance Garage, October 6th, No further showings.

[PDP presents Gabrielle Revlock and Lionel Popkin](#), The Performance Garage, November 18th, 7:30PM; November 19th, 2:00PM and 7:30PM.

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November 16, 2011