

DANCE

Casting a Documentarian's Eye on Dance's Past and Its Future

Dance on Camera Festival Has a Wide Focus

JAN. 30, 2014

Critic's Notebook

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Dance class: It's a place that we rarely associate with political skirmishes, cultural upheavals or socioeconomic pressures. But two films in the 42nd Dance on Camera festival, which begins on Friday at the Walter Reade Theater at Lincoln Center, remind us that the studio, the ballet barre, the halls of college dance departments — just like any social space — are realms where all of these tensions play out, in both quiet and dramatic ways.

The stories of dance education in Greg Vander Veer's "Miss Hill: Making Dance Matter" (which opens the festival, making its world premiere) and Mary Jane Doherty's 2013 "Secundaria" (which will have its New York premiere on Monday night) could hardly be more different, or differently illustrated. Both are illuminating, if occasionally plodding, in their own ways.

In his 80-minute documentary, Mr. Vander Veer leads us through the life of Martha Hill, a behind-the-scenes heroine in American dance history, who founded the influential Bennington School of the Dance in 1934 and, about two decades later, established the dance division at Juilliard. Ms. Doherty, through a more impressionistic, intimate lens, takes us to Havana, where she follows the three-year evolution of a high school class at the National Ballet School, focusing on three characteristically hard-working, gifted students. One film documents an entire lifetime; the other, the daily intricacies of three lives.

"I was brought up to think that theater was something that nice people didn't do," says the voice of Hill, toward the beginning of "Miss Hill," describing

her evangelical upbringing in rural Ohio. (She was born in 1900 and died in 1995.) “Dancing was something beyond the pale,” she continues. “You didn’t dance at all.”

Hill, the story goes, didn’t care; she loved to move. She uprooted to New York City, enrolled in the Martha Graham school — the cutting-edge of modern dance, practically the source of what was then a nascent, revolutionary art form — and joined Graham’s company in 1929.

That defiance, that tenacity, animated Hill’s life, and it drives “Miss Hill” forward, too. Mr. Vander Veer captures the complexities of her character and career through interviews with no fewer than 49 people (though with so many voices at his disposal, he sometimes overstates his point).

More than a biography, though, “Miss Hill” sheds light on the artistic movement that Hill both belonged to and helped to create, as she found her niche not onstage but in less-visible roles: dance educator, administrator, advocate. Archival footage from Bennington — where the pioneers of modern dance spent their summers teaching, choreographing, collaborating — distills the essence of a time when American concert dance, like never before, sought to comment on society rather than escape from it; a time when, as the choreographer Bessie Schonberg said, “everything was new.”

And that’s only the first half. We also get a thorough history of the Juilliard dance department, its initially groundbreaking curriculum of warring genres (ballet and modern dance) and its near-demise at the hands of George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein, an episode in which matters of money, power, real estate, politics and national identity collide.

Dance aficionados may be familiar with these stories. Much less is known, however, about the world that Ms. Doherty delicately reveals throughout the 96 minutes of “Secundaria,” in which she sets out to learn how and why the National Ballet School in Cuba produces such high-caliber dancers. “What is special about their training,” she asks, “in a society that offers rare opportunities but with strings attached?”

“Secundaria” does not provide concrete answers so much as a candid, compelling portrait of three dancers, Gabriela Lugo Moreno, Mayara Piñeiro and Moisés León Noriega: in the studio, at home, on cultural diplomacy tours. Rather than expound on Cuba’s political and economic conditions, Ms. Doherty lets telling details surface in the interactions between dancers, teachers and families.

We see resilience, humor, courage and passion; we also see a distressing scarcity of resources. It's common to talk about the ephemerality of dance. But for Ms. Piñeiro, who will join Ms. Doherty in a post-screening discussion on Monday, it seems that dance was the one thing she knew she could hold onto.

A version of this article appears in print on January 31, 2014, on page C4 of the New York edition with the headline: Casting a Documentarian's Eye on Dance's Past and Its Future.