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## Making global connections through dance film

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In light of the recent emphasis at Roger Williams University on various initiatives to incorporate global and international perspectives into the life of the community, it is important that the performing arts be included in this effort. As the arts have historically brought the unique capacity to transcend differences in society-to collapse distinctions between the young and the old, the privileged and the unprivileged, the powerful and the powerless-it is through the arts that it may be possible to challenge old perspectives from fresh angles and to illuminate essential aspects of our turbulent world. In 1998, the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities stated, "One of the principle findings of our study ... is that the cultural sector is more integrated than any other sector of American life and is a living example of the strengths and possibilities of our oneness in difference and our difference in oneness."

Dance has always been an integral part of human culture; even before language, we communicated through movement and gesture. In its capacity to transcend language barriers, dance cuts to the heart of the universal human condition and allows us to experience truth in an immediate and visceral way. The challenge of the 21st century is to make oneness in diversity more conscious and to carry it to another level-not only in the cultural field, but in all the public arenas that bring people of the world together and define them as part of the greater human family.

My interest in both multicultural dance and choreography as a means of exploring personal and global issues is longstanding. In 1996 I choreographed a work entitled *Sarajevo: 12/24* concerning the genocide in Bosnia. In 2001 I created a *Hijab*, a dance about gender apartheid in Afghanistan. Last year I used the Argentine Tango form as a backdrop for exploring issues of cultural inheritance in *HeirLoom*, performed by the

Roger Williams University Dance Theatre. This year, I facilitated a semester-long interdisciplinary project with senior dance and visual arts majors to explore the notion of conflict, culminating in a multi-media performance presented at the Dance Theatre concert in December '05. It is in the spirit of my ongoing commitment to diversity and global understanding that I sought a Presidential Faculty Fellowship for an International Dance Initiative.

In considering how I might bring diverse global perspectives through dance to the Roger Williams community, film was an obvious choice. We are living, for better or for worse, in a world where most people encounter dance, and most everything else for that matter, on television before ever setting foot in a theater. Faced with the high cost of touring and restaging dance, it is logical for dancers to look to technology as a means of participating in global exchange. In addition, a new generation of film directors and choreographers - raised on television, home video and MTV - are beginning to realize the full potential of dance on film. Michael Bay, director of the 2001 feature, *Pearl Harbor* told *The New York Times* about a college course he took on film musicals. "It's strange," he said, "but when filmmakers are forced to solve the problems you need to solve to shoot dance, they really find themselves using the medium to its fullest." The invention of film and video technology has had a profound impact on dance-on access to it and on the creation, understanding and appreciation of it.

And so, with the opportunity to curate an international dance film festival, I became interested in exploring dance for camera. Often thought to be a relatively new invention, dancers and filmmakers have been experimenting together since the inception of cinematography in the 19th century. In a practical sense, film and video have

revolutionized dance. Now considered a principle tool of the trade, cinematic documents are found in the personal collection of every dancer and on the shelves of every dance department. The most ephemeral of the arts, it was nearly impossible to record and preserve dances (other than through the complex system of notation called Laban notation) until film was born. But with the discovery of film for documentary purposes with regard to dance, people were simultaneously experimenting with the true integration of these two artistic media: movement created specifically for the camera. For over a century, whether a documentation tool or a creative medium, the recorded moving image has forever changed the way we perceive and experience dance.

Early film pioneers were quick to recognize dance as an ideal subject for demonstrating the magic of their new invention. Thomas Edison captured the exotic and seductive vitality of dance, including that of Ruth St. Denis, one of Modern Dance's earliest pioneers. In late Victorian times, film allowed audiences to witness dance at a socially safe distance and began to shape the public's definition of dance, changing attitudes about the form for many decades to come. The introduction of new technologies at the turn of the century had a polarizing effect on the dance profession, however. Many believed that film threatened a fundamental value of dance-direct interpersonal encounters. Isadora Duncan, for example, did not allow anyone to film her dancing, feeling that dancers were at the mercy of filmmakers who were interested in technology rather than dance itself. But the 1960s ushered in a new generation of dancers eager to take control of the camera so they might design and produce video documents of their own. Creating dance for the camera is a natural extension of the dance artist's skills-sensitivity to visual form, motion, space and time, as well as a passion to communicate.

As a concert dancer trained to perform on stage, touring with Twyla Tharp and the Broadway revival of *West Side Story*, it was thoroughly entrenched in my psyche that dance was meant to be viewed live and in three dimensions. But I found, after delving into the world of dance films, that what you sacrifice in the immediacy of live dance performance you gain in accessibility, intimacy and limitless boundaries in combining dance and film. Imagine being able to experience the sensibilities of artists from Nigeria, Iceland, Norway, and Czechoslovakia, and others without ever leaving the comforts of home. Visualize anything imaginable: from a close-up perspective of the texture of skin to a panoramic view of movement on a mountaintop to a split screen experience of several movement sequences simultaneously to a special effects manipulation of the human form in movement to resemble the microcosmic realm. Film has truly revolutionized our ability to transport ourselves into the cultures and psyches of people around the globe as well as creating totally new dance forms when director and choreographer go beyond the constraints of the body and find new ways to capture human motion.

Through the generosity of the University and a Faculty Fellowship, I was able to spend the summer of 2005 researching dance films at the Lincoln Center library, the Dance Films Association in New York City and at the Dance Camera West Festival in Los Angeles, in order to bring to the Roger Williams community a glimpse of the vast body of dance films that exist from around the world. But the very thing that made the project attractive also made it difficult: because of the breadth of work available, I was faced with the challenge of selecting diverse films from different locations that could be shown in one evening. Because many of the films I saw were an hour or more in length, I

had to eliminate them simply for logistical reasons. Another consideration was that students would be the primary audience for viewing that dance film collection: to introduce the students to the medium of dance film, I sought out films that contained various cinematographic techniques and perspectives, including narrative and abstract, to illustrate a range of possibilities for movement and cinema. In addition, even though there are hundreds of films to see from various parts of the world, the quality of the filmmaking and the conceptual sophistication varies radically and the majority of funding for such experimentation exists primarily in the West. As curator of the first Roger Williams International Dance Film Festival, I decided to choose a handful of shorter films, all under 30 minutes, for a two hour evening of enlightening entertainment.

The film I chose to open the festival is entitled, *Black Spring*. With a French director and a Nigerian choreographer, this 26-minute favorite at dance film festivals since 2002, challenges Western notions of African bodies in movement. Interspersed with the choreography are scenes of contemporary life in Africa that serve to heighten the awareness of the social and political sensitivities inherent in modern African dance. Another of the longer selections in the festival, 16 minutes, was *Bittersweet* from the United States. This bold fusion of narrative text, using the haunting voice of Nina Simone and choreography by David Rousseve, probes the definition of the word bittersweet-as the moment when both greatest joy and searing agony are experienced simultaneously. The narrative traces the lives of three women of color, in 1940's America, whose seemingly unrelated stories intersect in a climax that is both as joyous as it is tragic. The third extended film of the evening, the 34-minute *The Cost of Living*, was the first place winner at the 2004 Dance On Camera Festival in New York City. This film, the last of

the evening choreographed and directed by Lloyd Newson of London's famed DV8 Physical Theater, is the perfect integration of narrative film and dance. It takes place in a faded seaside town where street performers struggle to find work and romance, bringing to light in a humorous way, how we view the fit and unfit in society.

Besides the three dance films mentioned, three other very short films were interspersed for purposes of variety and interesting film techniques. *Astragalus*, a world premier at our festival, was a more trendy, sexy 10-minute film that did as much choreographing in the editing room as in the actual movement sequences. Utilizing split-screen and other technologies, this film from Spain explores a dancer trapped between the two sides of her nature. *Burst*, a 5-minute film from Iceland, is about a lovers spat in the bedroom that leads to a burst water pipe. Slow motion, trampolines, and martial arts were just a few of the elements that make this accessible film a favorite among college students. The final choice for the festival, *Nascent* from Czechoslovakia, is the most abstract of all of the selections. Also a world premier at our festival, in this 10-minute film, traces of movement appear as blips in transmission or digital "vibrations" where the body and its image appear momentarily and men become part of a jumbled continuum. The director, trained as a microbiologist, uses the individual human form metaphorically emerging from the larger mass of humanity.

Dance film communicates on a most basic level, eliminating barriers of language and geography. Through this accessible art form, one is able to experience a variety of global perspectives that tend to crystallize aspects of the universal human experience, promoting our sense of belonging to a global family. Seeing other cultural viewpoints through the medium of film reinforces the widely held notion that the only way to truly

eliminate the all-too-prevalent conflict in the world is through opening our hearts to the differences in other cultures and thus experience authentic understanding. But most striking in seeing these perspectives from around the world are the similarities rather than the differences-that even though we may live in different locations with unique language and cultural information, the fundamental human experiences birth, death, love, longing for understanding-are common to all people. The first Roger Williams International Dance Film Festival presented on November 6, 2005, was my attempt to contribute to the urgent need for global connection through the artistic medium of dance film.