

John N. Smith/
Michael McKennirey's
Gala

Dance, in one sense, lends itself naturally to a medium which by its very nature is congenial to movement. Film, like dance, consists of movement in time and space, used expressively. The many types of "cinematic movement" (from camera movement to camera angles, to the pace and rhythm created by cutting, mixing, dissolving, camera speed, etc.), can contribute immensely to the dance experience.

The degree to which a dance film utilizes cinematic movement to enhance, integrate and transmit the dance experience, determines the artistic level of the film.

This does not mean that a dance film is ineffective unless it is a complex cinematic extravaganza, pulling all a filmmaker's tricks out of the bag. But it does mean that the film should be a part of, and impart to the audience, a true dance experience.

For this reason, *Gala* is only a partially successful dance film. Given the limitations the filmmakers were working under, it could be no more than a passive record of the Canadian Dance Spectacular which took place at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa on May 30, 1981.

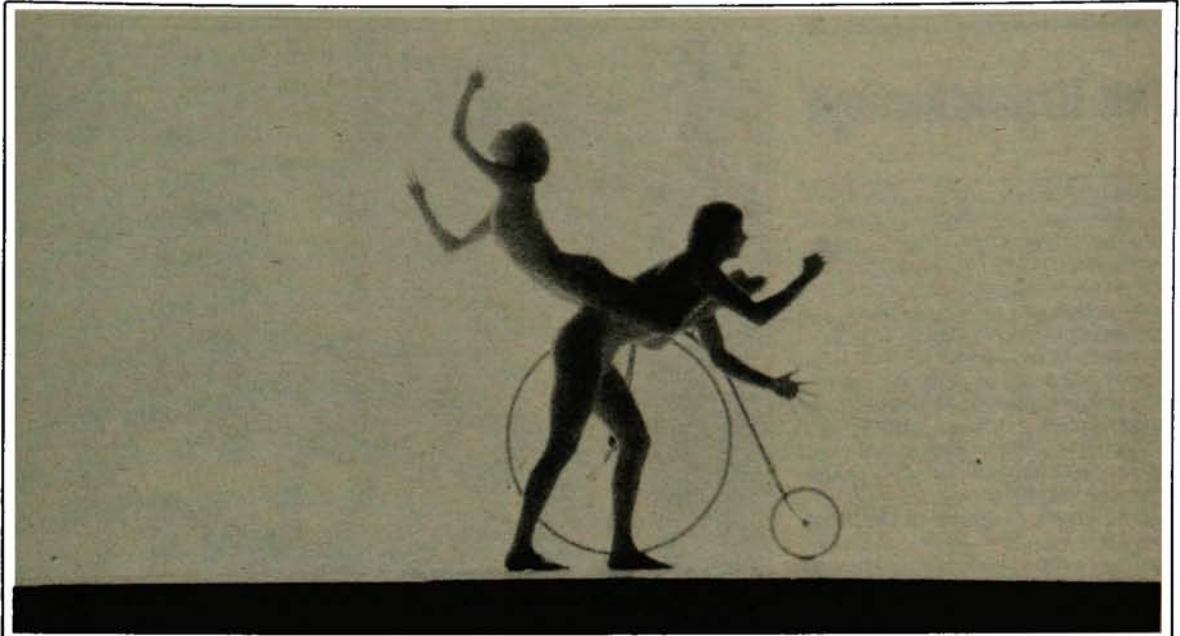
There was no possibility of causing acting to be performed (for the camera), of shooting the dance performances many times in an effort to register the best performance from the best point of view, or of selecting and combining the most effective shots into a continuity. There was no chance that a camera could have been placed on the stage or a crane over the stage so that the camera movement could have been more integrated with the dancer's movement. In short, this dance performance was not made for film. The film, in this case, was made for the dancers.

The importance of filming (or televising, as was originally planned) this performance was indisputable. It was a first in Canadian dance history: eight of Canada's foremost dance companies on the same stage on the same night. The participating dance companies were The Anna Wyman Dance Theatre, Danny Grossman Dance Company, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, Le Groupe de la Place Royale, The National Ballet of Canada, The Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Toronto Dance Theatre and Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers.

The Canadian Association of Professional Dance Organizations (CAPDO) organized the event to deliberately draw attention to and promote Canadian dance, both nationally and abroad. It was to be a two-hour live telecast which CBC producer Norman Campbell (who retains producer's credit for *Gala*) had spent months planning for. But just days before opening night, the CBC had to pull out over a labour dispute with its NABET technicians.

Gerry Eldred, then president of CAPDO, said: "Performing for audiences at the NAC was, of course, important, but the telecast which would bring our dancers into homes across the country was the heart of the event. If we couldn't have that, we certainly wanted to at least record the situation."

Enter the National Film Board (NFB),



● The Anna Wyman Dance Theatre

whose directors John Smith, Cynthia Scott, David Wilson and Michael McKennirey had been involved, with the same eight dance companies months before the event when they travelled across the country filming their one-hour documentary, *For the Love of Dance*.

John Smith, Colin McIntyre (of CAPDO) and John Goldsmith (director of Public Relations for the NAC) began the herculean task of negotiating between the various unions and government agencies involved. Once the NFB had committed themselves (and one million dollars) to the film, considerable administrative, artistic and technical problems had to be ironed out in a very short period of time. Contract obligations had to be worked out between the NAC stage crew, orchestra musicians and conductors, eight dance directors, choreographers, stage managers, set designers and lighting directors, as well as pay schedules for the 95 dancers.

They had to obtain NABET's permission before they could commence filming and to respect collective agreements with other performing arts unions. Director John Smith recalls: "Agreements were being made at 5:00 p.m. Saturday and curtain time was at 8:30 p.m."

Technical problems arose over the computerized lighting system, which although bright enough for TV, was insufficient for film. In just one day, everything was re-lit. To top it off, the cameramen were unfamiliar with the choreography, so they had to photograph intuitively and instinctively. Smith refers

to this entire technical and bureaucratic ordeal as a "director's nightmare."

But with the admiration and respect that Smith, McKennirey and Scott had developed for these dance companies during the on-the-road filming of their previous documentary, the directorial trio had strong feelings about the need to film this spectacular. The effort was deemed more than just worthwhile; it was essential.

What of the film itself? As mentioned earlier, it is effectively a documentary record of a dance performance. Seven cameras were placed at strategic points of view throughout the hall and backstage. Camera lenses were selected, speeds were set at 24 frames per second, and the entire action was filmed as it unrolled before the camera's "eyes." What we are left with, on film, is a competent but unimaginative handling of the material. Colours are, for the most part, intense and crisp, with good separation values, probably very true to the tonal clarity of the actual event. The Dolby stereo sound is admirably clean and full, with virtually no leakage from audience shufflings and coughs, or the heavy landings of dancer's feet.

Most of the dancing is filmed in medium-long shot, which shows the dancer's full bodies and fluid movements to greater advantage. Very often the entire stage fills the screen, and one is left with the illusion, as in Bergman's *Magic Flute*, that we are watching an actual stage performance.

But it is in the camera movement and shot-to-shot juxtapositions that this film

occasionally misses and momentarily loses the fluidity of the dance. Toronto Dance Theatre's *Baroque Suite*, with its angular and geometric configurations, must have been difficult for an unfamiliar camera crew to follow, and at times, what ends up in the frame is not the central thrust of the action. In Danny Grossman's *Higher*, however, closeups of the two dancer's facial expressions were essential to a conveyance of the sexual overtones of the piece.

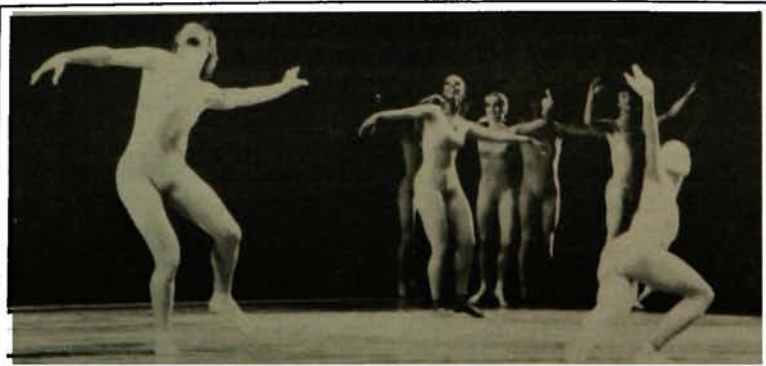
Highpoints of the film are Evelyn Hart's joyous and light-as-air performance in the Royal Winnipeg's *Our Waltzes* and the visually engaging *Dance is... This... and This* by the Anna Wyman Dance Theatre. Between performances, the film cuts backstage to the dressing rooms and wings, where dancers are shown in varying degrees of pre-performance jitters, concentration and even relaxation. The National Ballet's Celia Franca and Evelyn Hart of the Royal Winnipeg receive most of the backstage cameras' attention, thereby contributing a thread of continuity on a more personal level to the film.

As dancers scrutinize other companies' performances intensely from the wings, in some of the most genuinely unselfconscious of the backstage footage, we get a real sense of the dancer's commitment to their art. They are at some times spellbound, at times amused, and at times amazed.

With the filming of the Spectacular, these companies now have a very effective public relations tool in *Gala*. It is to be shown widely abroad, according to Smith. Aside from distribution through the regular NFB library network, *Gala* will be shown on national television and in runs at selected theatres nationally.

It should accomplish what it was intended to do: increase public awareness of the rich diversity and creativity within the Canadian dance community.

Lyn Martin ●



● The Toronto Dance Theatre

GALA p. d./ed. John N. Smith, Michael McKennirey, d.o.p. Savas Kalogeras, performance cam. Susan Trow, Tony Lanzetta, Roger Rochat, Barry Perles, Roger Moride, backstage d. Cynthia Scott, cam. Paul Cowan, Andreas Poulsson, post-p. ed. Hans Peter Strobl, loc. record. Claude Hazanavicius, ed. ed. Andre Galbrand, exec. p. Adam Symansky, p.c./dist. National Film Board of Canada (1981), running time 90 min, colour/16 mm, VTR