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## DANCE FOR CAMERA

**First Run Features** // 2003 // 95 Minutes // Not Rated

Reviewed by Judge Bryan Byun // July 29th, 2005

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### The Charge

Award-winning dance films from around the world.

### The Case

**Dance for Camera** is a dance term for works created specially for film, and that's what's presented on this 2003 compilation of dance performance shorts, selected from the Dance Camera West Festival in Los Angeles. These six award-winning films come from the United States, Switzerland, Netherlands, and Canada, and offer a range of presentations of the dance form.

**Reines d'un Jour**, or "Queens for a Day" (25 minutes), a 1996 Swiss film by Pascal Magnin, begins with a group of well-dressed young people rolling down a hill somewhere in the Swiss Alps. Rolling, yes, but gracefully. They roll, then run back up the hill and roll down again. They nap. They embrace. Cows watch from the hillside. There is more rolling, then some type of dance involving people staggering to their feet, then falling and rolling. After about five minutes of this, we cut to shots of cows being herded by Swiss cowherds, who seem unruffled by the presence of well-dressed young dancers rolling around amongst their cattle. We then go to the second vignette, of a woman standing outside a cabin, leaning dejectedly against the wall, then rolling along the wall while slipping her feet into each of a long row of shoes. Children watch and laugh, then run away. A third vignette shows bulls butting heads while cowherds whack them with sticks. Then, the dancers pair up and begin butting heads. Sadly, the cowherds do not whack the dancers with sticks. Following a final vignette with three women dancing in a pond, there is a postscript about a folk tale involving three maidens who loved to dance, and were found dead one morning, punished by God for their love of dance.

**Measure** (7 minutes), a 2001 American production by the 33 Fainting Spells dance company, has two white-clad dancers doing a shuffling sort of tap dance in a filthy, dilapidated hallway. Each seems vaguely discomfited; they dance, run through doorways, look pensive. Over the course of the brief film, their dancing, which is initially awkward and out of sync, becomes more and more synchronized.

**Rest in Peace** (10 minutes), a Netherlands/UK production from 2000, directed by Annick Vroom, follows a group of mourners from the funeral procession of a deceased couple who may have been the dancers' parents, to the deceased couple's house, where we observe their mourning. The dancers comfort each other, squabble, grieve, frolic, unravel, and uncover some surprising family secrets.

**The Village Trilogy** (23 minutes), a 1995 Canadian film by Laura Taler, shot in gritty black and white, consists of three dance routines set on a wintry day in a rural village. "Casa" depicts a young woman stumbling drowsily along a sidewalk, yawning, jerking spasmodically, and groping her armpit. "Copii" finds a man lurking furtively in a forest, then falling asleep, only to wake to the sight of another man jerking spasmodically in front of him. They dance. "Famiglia" has a group of villagers deep in discussion around a table. They take turns breathing into each other's cupped hands, in symbolic communication. Then they fling their arms up in supplication to the heavens.

**Cornered** (5 minutes), a 1997 Canadian film by Michael Downing, shows a woman clad in black pitching herself from corner to corner in an empty white room, while the camera rotates and swoops in and out on her writhing form.

**Contrecoup** (25 minutes), another film by Pascal Magnin, this one from 1997, takes place in a city, at night. An angry, well-dressed man dances in the street while making threatening gestures at passersby. Then we see a man and a woman in an apartment, grappling with each other, writhing around, and arguing. The rest of the film follows a similar course, the dancers quarreling and tussling, with brief interludes of the young woman burbling inanities (which leads to more fighting). For some reason, some of the furniture is on tall stilts.

As someone who hasn't had much exposure to experimental dance, I found the shorts from **Dance for Camera** baffling, amusing, stultifying, moving, and thought-provoking in roughly equal measure. Dance aficionados will no doubt get more out of this than the casual viewer. For my tastes, the dances are most effective when they either tell a clear narrative, like **Rest in Peace**, which expresses identifiable emotions, conflicts, and relationships through physical movement, or when they express a particular idea—like **Measure**'s time-synchronization metaphor—through dance. Just as the power of musicals lies in their ability to capture certain feelings or ideas more effectively through music than any other form, the best moments in these films tell stories that cannot be told by means other than the motion and intersection of bodies.

That's what makes a piece like **Reines d'un Jour** so difficult to endure. Beyond the basic premise of humans interacting with, emulating, and conflicting with nature, enacting the primal dance of life, the film has nowhere to go. Cut down to five, even ten minutes, **Reines d'un Jour** would more than get its point across, but director Magnin doesn't know when to quit; the whole thing quickly unravels into a redundant, self-indulgent mess, filled with pointlessly repetitive imagery. (It's a bad sign for your movie when the peripheral footage of the earthy, genuine country folk is far more intriguing and meaningful than the goofy, obnoxious dancers.)

Magnin's **Contrecoup** falls into much the same trap, making its point over, and over, and over again until what is at first bursting with kinetic fury, charged with sexual violence, becomes steadily less potent and more numbing. **The Village Trilogy** succumbs to the same kind of precious, self-indulgent compulsion towards the esoteric over the expressive, grasping desperately for profundity and tumbling headlong into the ridiculous. In the immortal words of Spinal Tap, "there's a thin line between clever and stupid," and too many of these works tumble off the wrong side of that fence.

These films are presented on DVD in both 1.66:1 widescreen and full-frame transfers. Print quality is wildly variable, since the shorts range from polished, well-funded productions to what appear to be amateur projects made on a shoestring budget. **Rest in Peace** is one of the disc's best-looking offerings, with pretty good color reproduction and contrast, but poor presentation of blacks, which look grainy and slightly distorted. On the other end of the scale is **Cornered**, which looks like it was shot on super-8 and the negative stored in the glove compartment of the director's car. Audio too is pretty hit-or-miss, presented in Dolby Digital sound that's sometimes clear and bright, other times murky and indistinct. Since these films are all about dance, however, the sound (except possibly in **Measure**) is largely secondary to the motion. The DVD contains no extras other than some First Run Features trailers.

For the student or aficionado of dance, **Dance for Camera** should be a fascinating survey of what's being done in the medium around the world. For the layman, it's a bit of a mixed bag, with a couple of accessible pieces almost but not quite balancing out the abstruse and eye-rollingly arty entries. Still, on the whole the dance sequences are lively and consistently watchable; I can't imagine anyone not actively interested in contemporary dance seeking out this title, but if you do, you may find some entertaining moments amongst all the flailing about.