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Dance on film gets its due

A look at L.A. choreographer Rudy Perez and a Q&A session kick off the film festival.

By LAURA BLEIBERG The Orange County Register

The exacting and deliberate work of teaching a dance can be scintillating to observe. Other times, it's like watching paint dry.

Not so the interactions between Los Angeles choreographer Rudy Perez and dancer Victor Quijada. Perez, a senior figure in the post-modern dance movement, passes on to this young man not just the steps but the emotional foundation of his signature solo "Countdown" (1964), and does it with kindness and care. Their exchanges are one of the joys of the swift-moving documentary film "Countdown: Reflections of a Life in Dance," which is featured at the annual Dance Camera West international film festival, running tonight through June 30 at theaters in Los Angeles. The 54-minute film, by director Rachel Perez-Bitan, will be screened at 5 p.m. Saturday at REDCAT, followed by a question-and-answer session with Perez.

Every year the festival puts out a call for entries from filmmakers around the world. Festival director Lynette Kessler curates a smorgasbord of movies - more than 50 this year - to represent the diversity of dance on film: documentaries, features and experimental works. The latter category covers a wide gamut of styles and content, continuing to challenge the boundaries of what we think of as dance.

Perez, 75, was among the group of avant-garde artists who helped expand the definition of dance at concerts held in Greenwich Village's Judson Church during the 1960s - which is where Perez premiered "Countdown."

Little happens during the dance's roughly seven minutes. The solo dancer sits, lights a cigarette, folds his body, reaches hands to his face and, in a final agonized gesture, arms out toward the audience.

It was a time of bold experimentation and Perez, who had studied with Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, shared the audaciousness of his compatriots who dared to believe that any movement - or the lack of it - could be dance.

The movie "Countdown" tells Perez's story through home movies, interviews with Perez and colleagues and footage from performances. The filmmakers inserted the rehearsal footage in pieces throughout the movie. Perez is both articulate and honest. In listening to him coach the young dancer, the viewer learns much about the dance itself, and even more about how a choreographer uses stillness as a narrative device.

At one point, Perez tells Quijada that the closing movement should encompass "all the pain (in life), what it takes to survive," adding that he hopes the young man has not experienced Perez's own difficulties. Perez's mother died when he was 7, and he lived in a cold-water flat in New York City. Even though he achieved recognition as a performer and choreographer, the struggle to survive has not been easy.

Perez moved from New York to Los Angeles in 1978, where he has been a respected teacher and leader of a small company. His eyesight is poor now, and the film shows him walking with a white cane. He expresses the bitterness of many Southern California choreographers when he says that he has had a hard time getting his work seen outside of Los Angeles.

In addition to the discussion with Perez (moderated by freelance dance writer Victoria Looseleaf), a discussion on the future of dance on film will follow a screening of movies from Scandinavia on June 15 at the UCLA Hammer Museum. Festival director Kessler will moderate a discussion between Magne Antonsen, artistic director of Ultima Film - Dans for Kamera, Oslo, Norway, and Gaelen Hanson, director of New Dance Cinema and of the Seattle dance-theater company 33 Fainting Spells.