

Filmed Choreography Conjures Kelly (in the Rain) and Astaire (Head to Toe)

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY NOV. 10, 2008

An attractive woman dances alone, arching her spine and stretching her limbs in expansive yearning. Suddenly a man's hand, from behind, touches her shoulder, her spine, her arm. We know he answers her longing. Yet we also know she's alone. The man is her imagination. Or is he ours?

This scene occurs in "The Rain," a 2007 film directed and choreographed by Pontus Lidberg of Sweden that was shown at the New Museum on Friday and Saturday as part of a Dance on Camera presentation of new shorts. (Though Mr. Lidberg's work may not be known in New York, he worked in August with Christopher Wheeldon and his Morphoses company in Vail, Colo.) Memorably "The Rain" illustrates what filmed dance can say that staged dance cannot.

It does so by crosscutting. We've not only been watching the woman (Hedda Staver Cooke) alone in one setting, we've been watching the man alone in another. For a moment, when we see his hand touching her, we think he's entered her setting. Next we see him in his setting touched by her hands. Later clips show each alone again.

Throughout these and other scenes — "The Rain" also shows two other couples — rain pours nonstop. It's beautifully lit. The very ground shimmers anew with every falling drop. Droplets hanging on noses, chins and throats look like pearls. In the male-female scene above, this rain looks naturalistic (think of Gene Kelly). But the rain falling on other characters in a bedroom, in the bath, in a living room is surreal. Rain, rain: metaphor for unstoppable passion.

Crosscutting also alternates that first couple with a male duo (Mr. Lidberg himself plays one of these). The point that same-sex love is equal to heterosexual love is evident. Where we react differently, however, is to close-ups of lovers (of whatever sexuality) dancing out together the longing that in another couple expresses the frustration of separation. Watching these clothed men in their unending demonstrations of steamy sexual desire — the only blip in "The Rain" — I found myself prosaically thinking, "Stop dancing, take your clothes off, and just do what you're all too evidently thinking about."

I had the opposite reaction, though, to Ben Dolphin's five-minute film "Arising" (United States, 2008), I wanted to shout, "Oh, put your clothes back on and dance!" This was followed at the New Museum of Contemporary Art by a live performance of Mr. Dolphin's five-minute "On Arising," in which 18 bare-chested men and women rolled, writhed, stretched and threw each other about. Oh for clothing! Oh (yet more urgently), for even a smattering of good choreography!

Patrick Lovejoy's nine-minute silent film "Surface" (United States, 2008, accompanied by live saxophone music played by Jay Rodriguez) was elegant in its use of shadow and split-screen imagery but negligible as dance. Klara Elenius's 15-minute "Insyn" (Sweden, 2007) was a piece of arty domestic dance surrealism for two women and one man, heavily influenced by Ingmar Bergman at his most joyless, but with its characters reduced almost to mechanistic bizarrerie.

The program's happiest note came with Gabrielle Lamb's six-minute "Quizas, Quizas, Quizas" (Canada, 2007), a charming piece of whimsy that combined animation with clips of Ginger Rogers (sometimes with Fred Astaire) and art photographs (by Man Ray or of Josephine Baker and others) all bumping. Apart from the clips of Fred and Ginger in "Follow the Fleet," this had no human dance, and yet the whole film had the constant flow of movement and dream-logic of good cartoons. It also had the quality of play that often characterizes good or great art.

It was Astaire who, more than 70 years ago, established the classical principles of filming dance. (Film the dancers head to toe, in takes as long and few as possible, without crosscutting or close-ups.) Since Astaire, dance on screen has rarely followed those principles, and usually the result is — as dance — unsatisfactory. But "The Rain" and "Quizas, Quizas, Quizas" show how imaginatively and expressively directors can open up successful non-Astaire paths.

The 37th annual Dance on Camera Festival runs Jan. 6 to 17 at Lincoln Center; dancefilms.org.

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