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## "15 Days of Dance: The Making of 'Ghost Light'" by Elliot Caplan

### Days 12 & 13

by Carmel Morgan

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Have you ever wanted to be a fly on the wall during the process of choreographing a ballet? Elliot Caplan gives you that rare opportunity with his remarkable documentary "15 Days of Dance: the Making of 'Ghost Light'," a monumental 22-hour film commissioned by the Center for the Moving Image at the University of Buffalo. On a recent Sunday afternoon at the National Gallery of Art, I attended the world premiere of Days 12 & 13, a substantial excerpt from Caplan's film. The film was presented in association with the American Ballet Theatre, which was in the nation's capital finishing a series of performances at the Kennedy Center. Three of ABT's young dancers hopped in a taxi after the final matinee performance of "Romeo & Juliet" to join Caplan in a discussion moderated by dance critic Ann Murphy after the film.



15 Days of Dance  
Photo © Delizia Flaccavento

In Days 12 & 13, we observed, among other things: a premiere performance; a master ballet class that was part of the Studio Company's sponsored residency at the University of Buffalo; and tons of rehearsal time. The first performance of "Ghost Light," a ballet for six dancers choreographed by Brian Reeder for ABT's Studio Company (now known as ABT II), took place in Buffalo, New York. The city of Buffalo presented the commissioned ballet "Ghost Light" to the people of New Orleans as a gift. In keeping with the idea of a gift, Buffalo's mayor, Byron Brown, insisted that the premiere take place before busloads of Buffalo students at the grand Shea's Performing Arts Center. Many of the students probably had never been to a theater, let alone seen a ballet. Their energy was infectious, and the former ABT Studio Company dancers who participated in the panel discussion following the film – Devon Teuscher, Katherine Williams, and Mary Mills Thomas (all now members of ABT's corps de ballet) – said that they fed off of the students' noisy excitement and riotously enthusiastic applause.



"Ghost Light" is set to Aaron Copland's "Music for Theater." Reeder infused the ballet with vaudeville flair. While Reeder was inspired to make a ballet paying tribute to flappers and burlesque, the desire to thoroughly document the creation of a dance motivated Caplan, an Emmy Award-winning director who had previously collaborated with Merce Cunningham, to embark on this project. Although he wished to meticulously document the choreographic process, "15 Days of Dance" was not originally intended to be such an extended portrait of how a dance comes to life. Caplan, however, did not succeed

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in his attempt to edit the documentary to make it a more standard duration. Thus, he ultimately resolved to include far more footage. Currently, "15 Days of Dance" is a whopping 22 hours.

Caplan employed multiple camera angles, including a mix of tight shots and those that embraced the entire stage. In some shots, Caplan used a split screen, displaying the dancers' upper bodies separately from their feet. Most often, it seemed, the camera was behind the dancers on the stage (where it was safely out of the dancers' way), giving us a unique viewpoint. It was fun to see the back and forth between the dancers rehearsing sections of "Ghost Light" and Reeder's reactions as he watched them from a seat in the theater, scribbling notes and occasionally shouting out praise. Many minutes were occupied by Reeder going over detailed notes with the dancers, and the dancers attempting to enact his corrections.

As Caplan's eye wandered, so did ours. A view of the marvelous ceiling of the theater and a close-up of a dancer's perfectly arched foot failed to distract, however. Instead, the different perspectives Caplan gave enriched the experience of witnessing the birth of a new ballet.

Reeder appeared conspicuously aware of the camera's presence at times. He smiled a lot, and he tended to be extremely articulate when working with the dancers. The dancers in the panel discussion admitted they initially found it difficult to ignore the camera. Yet despite some self-consciousness on the part of the participants, the film is still a triumphant vision of the tremendous effort involved in creating a dance. It will be an important teaching tool and also an entertaining and informative historical record evidencing how Reeder and the ABT's Studio Company dancers made "Ghost Light" happen.

Apparently, there are additional screenings of Caplan's work scheduled for Feb. 11 and March 8, 2010, at the Performing Arts Library, Lincoln Center, New York. Caplan said that he hopes to make a box set of 20 DVDs available to the public for purchase. It's also possible that at some point in the future the film will be shown in its full length at a museum like the National Gallery of Art.

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