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Putting It Together, and Filming It

By GIA KOURLAS

BACK in 2007, when ABT II was known as the ABT Studio Company, a revolutionary project began involving Elliot Caplan, a filmmaker who wanted to commission a dance, and Brian Reeder, a choreographer who was always eager to make a new one. As it happened, Mr. Caplan — a professor in the media study department and the artistic director of the Center for the Moving Image at the [University at Buffalo](#) — was in a position to do something about it.

An Emmy Award-winning director perhaps best known for his long collaboration with [Merce Cunningham](#) ("Cage/Cunningham" is one revered example), Mr. Caplan had long been troubled by the lack of documentation in dance. Why not film a dance from the ground up? Though as a filmmaker he had focused primarily on modern dance, for his new project Mr. Caplan decided to look at ballet.

"I think the first time you go to a restaurant that someone recommends, you want to get what they're known for," he said at his studio on the Lower East Side. "Ballet is the basis for everything in dance."

Mr. Reeder, a frequent choreographer for the ABT Studio Company, was recommended to Mr. Caplan by the staff at [American Ballet Theater](#) for the creation of the new ballet, commissioned by the Center for the Moving Image.

The result, "15 Days of Dance: The Making of 'Ghost Light,'" documents a three-week rehearsal process, followed by a one-week residency in Buffalo in early 2007. And here is where things get bizarre: The film, a rigorous and highly entertaining depiction of that murky thing, the choreographic process, is 18 hours long.

Mr. Caplan, a soft-spoken man with a passion for finding the place where film and dance meet, has created a genre that departs from the documentary form: reality ballet. "Obviously, nothing can replace live performance, but how many people attend a performance?" he asked. "I used to joke with Merce that when someone goes to a cinema on a Monday night, if they don't like the film, they could go back to the cinema on Wednesday. But for someone to go to a dance performance and not like it, they won't go back for two years."

In "15 Days of Dance" Mr. Caplan said he hopes to change that. Beginning Thursday he will host the first of four one-hour screenings of different sections of the film at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Each program will be followed by a panel discussion with participating artists. And, no, Mr. Caplan isn't expecting anyone to experience the entire film at one sitting. He has broken down his epic into 18 volumes, each of which will be available for private viewing in the library's [Jerome Robbins](#) Dance Division.

"Ghost Light" is named after the stark, romantic image of a bare bulb left burning on a deserted stage. Set to

[Aaron Copland](#)'s "Music for the Theater," the dance, which was presented as a gift from the city of Buffalo to the people of New Orleans, has a vintage quality, with dancers costumed as flappers and hobos.

"I was thinking of New Orleans and how it has such a deep sense of its own history and jazz," Mr. Reeder said. "It's one of the reasons I went with an old Americana feel of vaudeville, burlesque and the whole ghost-light vibe."

Mr. Reeder, a former member of [New York City Ballet](#), [William Forsythe](#)'s Ballet Frankfurt and Ballet Theater, possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of classical ballet and Broadway forms, which he imparts throughout the film. "It's always the things that we don't do in class that become tricky," he says after a dancer is too tentative with her bowler hat. "We're not doing it like [Judy Garland](#)" — he pauses to snap his fingers and sing, "Forget your troubles, come on get happy," adding: "It's much more bummy. It's on your head, so really shove it down."

Mr. Caplan, watching the footage in his studio, laughed in delight. "He's this kind of nervous-relaxed guy," he said of Mr. Reeder. "Very low key. He's kind of schlumpy. One of the things that he's going to be horrified at is that he's constantly pulling up his trousers, because he would always forget to wear a belt. But there's a reason: He puts himself in this relaxed place where he can make decisions, and his decisions are wonderful."

Because of the film's frequent split-screen technique — Mr. Caplan and the cinematographer Donald DuBois shot it with two cameras — the viewer is able to watch the dancers and Mr. Reeder's reaction at once. Mr. Reeder's mood isn't always camera friendly.

"It might not be what you want to do, but it's what I want you to do, so make your body do it," he tells three young men attempting and not succeeding to perform a unison phrase. "Please." He adds dismally, "You guys would make a horrible true Bournonville pas de trois."

In a later interview Mr. Reeder explained: "You don't want to come off like the stereotypical old B-movie crazy choreographer, but when you really get into the process of making your work, you're in a different zone. I was so focused on wanting to create the steps in the right atmosphere for the piece that I couldn't be worried about Elliot or anybody else in the room."

That is crucial. For Mr. Caplan one of the fascinating things about the film is how it allows the viewer to watch Mr. Reeder think. "Everyone is intent on doing whatever comes out of his mind, even before it comes out of his mind," he said. "That's the making process, and it's where the choreographer engages the dancers. They develop a relationship in those moments. It's beautiful to watch, and we have this on film, and to me the silences are the film."

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