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Hofer's 'Horizons' Pays Tribute To Classical Ballet

'Meaning Of Live' Chronicles Reunion Of Surviving Monty Python

LOS ANGELES, May 3, (RTRS): An almost spiritual celebration of classical ballet, as practiced by three generations of Cuban terps, Eileen Hofer's "Horizons" pays tribute to the discipline and dedication it takes to dance, while offering a glimpse at contempo life in a country that still remains largely shielded to American eyes. Hofer's central attraction here is her access to ballet legend and local hero Alicia Alonso, now 93, who refused to abandon her calling despite vision problems that left her nearly blind. Alonso founded the National Ballet of Cuba, for which Viengsay Valdes now dances, while young Amanda de Jesus Perez Duarte, who aspires to join the company, rounds out the trio. Together, their interwoven stories give arthouse auds an enchanting glimpse of ballet talent, past, present and future.

Rather than looking for dramatic arcs or narrative challenges in each of the three dancers' lives, rising Swiss helmer Eileen Hofer has taken a looser, less literal approach. On one hand, having spent ample time observing her subjects in Havana, she looks for visual matches within the footage that allow her to transition among the three characters — and move even deeper into the past — as seen in a 90-second opening montage, when archival footage of a spinning Alonso cuts to Valdes doing fouettes centerscreen, followed by the less experienced Amanda practicing pirouettes in the same position.

Hofer appears to have discovered many of these homologues in editing, yielding an after-the-fact fluidity that poses an intriguing contrast with the rigid formalism of ballet itself.

Perfection

In dance, the performers push themselves toward perfection, attempting to master a sequence of moves dictated in advance, whereas Hofer collects her footage and only later assembles it into a free-flowing and hypnotic experience. The discipline of dance also speaks to another of the film's themes, which concerns the link between ballet and Cuban communism. In many ways, ballet is an ideal metaphor for such a system, representing the apotheosis of artistic conformity, self-sacrifice and obedience, and it comes as little surprise to see Alonso held up as a national hero, feted by Fidel Castro himself: "Ballet is the foundation of our revolution," the people chant.

Hofer tags along as Amanda visits the National Ballet, whose halls function as a shrine to Alonso's greatness, and where a mischievous kitten seems oblivious to the significance.

There, a tour guide offers insight into Alonso's personality (she allegedly still carries her slippers everywhere she goes), while the grande dame herself continues to give lessons.

At one point, we even witness a ceremony in which the nonagenarian dances a few steps. Once a swan, the woman now looks more like an old pterodactyl — such is the tragedy of age, yet another theme evoked by this intergenerational comparison.

Music, from Swiss chanteuse Heidi Happy and of the lower-key instrumental sort, ties everything together beautifully, encouraging free-associative reactions from the film's mesmerized audience.

Gold for fans, though unlikely to mean much to anyone else, "The Meaning of Live" chronicles the reunion of surviving Monty Python's Flying Circus members as the famed comedy troupe plays its first live shows in 34 years. Mixing a performance record with a light recap of the group's original heyday, Roger Graef and James Rogan's documentary premiered on British TV last fall. Its current fest run is high-profile yet unlikely to generate much further bigscreen interest, with tube and download sales remaining the ingratiating pic's principal outlets.

The five Pythons (Graham Chapman died in 1989) decide to perform live for the first time since 1980, for the simple reason that a lawsuit (underexplained here) has had a serious impact on some members' finances. Ergo, they're doing a 10-day run at London's O2 stadium, where they'll play nightly to crowds of 15,000 who'll mostly have their eyes glued to the Jumbo-Tron.

Amid a blaze of media attention, we see them get reacquainted, begin rehearsals, and perform shows that are primarily exercises in nostalgia for audiences who can recite each sketch line-by-line.

Between stage sequences (which end somewhat anti-climactically with a guest appearance by Mike Myers), the docu looks back at their glory days, somehow managing to skip the feature films ("Holy Grail," "Life of Brian," "Meaning of Life"). Their pleasure in each others' company is infectious, though any viewers previously unfamiliar with the absurdist material are likely to wonder just what all the fuss is about.

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