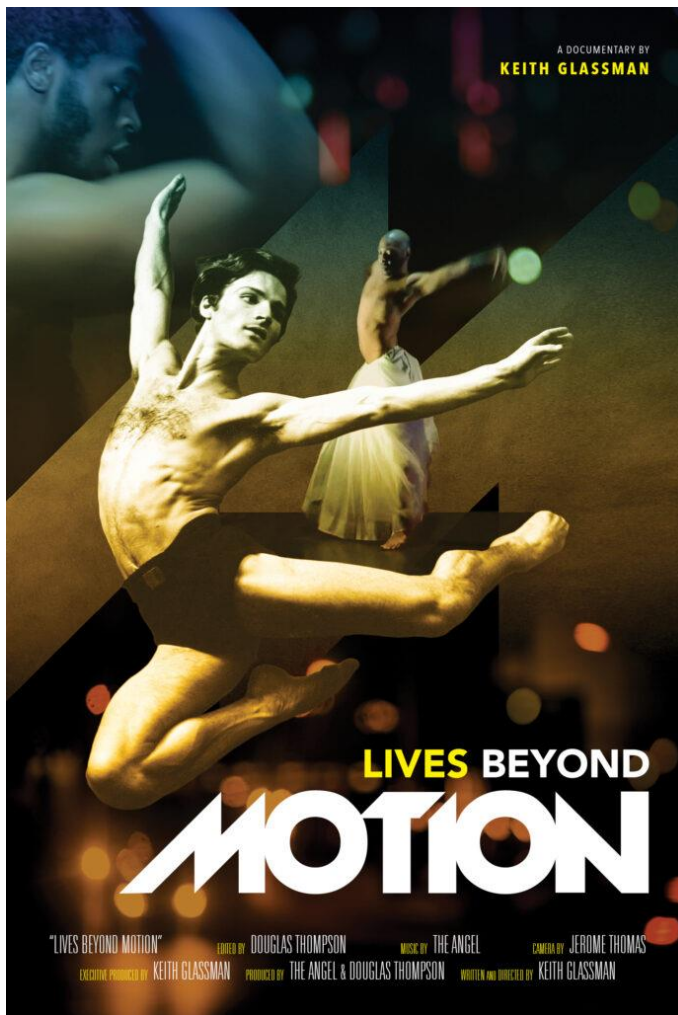


Could you make a dance documentary?

How one former dance MFA student found himself producing Lives Beyond Motion, a film that features other men in dance, including Lar Lubovitch, Jock Soto, Bill T. Jones, Donald Byrd, and Matthew Rushing.

by Keith Glassman



Lar Lubovitch on the film's poster

Before and after I earned my MFA in Dance, I had danced and toured for other choreographers and companies, created my own dances, hired dancers, created a not-for-profit company, wrote (and sometimes received) grants, curated shows and produced the work of other dancemakers. But with all of that, I could never make enough money to support myself, much less raise a family. I thought earning a master's degree would credential me to teach dance at the college level and, I had hoped, make those larger ambitions possible. However, life had some other plans and I wasn't able to pursue a teaching career. What to do?

I found myself wondering why I was so drawn to dance as an art form, despite the precariousness of dance as a career. I'd had no exposure to concert dance as a young person. My parents took me to see local musical theater productions and we watched Fred Astaire movies and variety shows on TV, but after one ballet class at age six (to correct my diagnosis as

being "pigeon-toed"), my complaints about being on tiptoe took me out of the dance studio. I later focused on postmodern dance with more interest and success, but it was a tough life, and I didn't feel I had a satisfactory answer to my question—why stick with it, what were the rewards? I decided to ask a few colleagues what keeps them devoted to this ephemeral experience. I was hoping I'd hear other dancers' words that would resonate with me. I listened to a wide range of answers. Some were esoteric, a few were perfunctory, and a handful were self-reflective; some

changed over time. As I shared these stories with a filmmaker friend, he suggested making a movie about it. A movie? I once made a 3-minute video from found sources (YouTube and home movies), but my pal was thinking double-digit figure-length. Thus was born, in 2007, “Why American Men Dance.”

Even without a background in film, I got into it. Right away, the money problem arose. As a first-time filmmaker, I knew I was not competitive for grant money in that medium. Dance funders favor performance, or education, or scholarly investigations, and I couldn’t find much support for documentary movie makers in dance. But I didn’t despair. How hard could it be?

Around that time, crowdfunding was just getting started and we had yet to be barraged by every good cause’s request for support. Plus, some platforms would bait the pot with some of their own money. My friends, family, colleagues, co-workers and some unknown donors threw a few bucks into the hat. Jerome, a graduate school friend with a professional camera, offered to shave some dollars off his regular cinematographer’s rate and we were off! I decided to request interviews from notable men who had had successful dance careers. Our first travels were close to where I lived — LA and San Diego, then San Francisco, Seattle and, finally, New York.

What I found when I sat down with choreographer/performers David Rousseve and Jeff Slayton was that every man had a story. My questions were about how it felt, how it was or wasn’t supported by the people around the young dancer and how they were inspired. The artists were eager to tell me stories I had never heard. Each man had an interesting tale about their beginnings, challenges, support networks and reasons they dance. I originally asked for an hour of their time, but some talked willingly with me on camera for twice that long. Postmodern choreographer Douglas Dunn had some great descriptions of dreams that motivated him to dance and a mysterious college professor who brought him to his first ballet class when he was a student at Princeton.

In some of those cities, I had relatives or friends who offered spaces for my camera person to shoot the interviews...and to sleep! The artists I interviewed had offices and studios which they shared with the project, as well. Slowly, working around these in-kind donors’ schedules, things started to happen. I was thrilled. Then came editing the film...

Jerome warned me about the editing process, about how turning 70 hours of footage into a 60 to 90-minute movie was a daunting task for even a veteran filmmaker, not to mention for a beginner. What did I know? As a choreographer, I was familiar with editing for the stage, but I had much less experience with a two-dimensional format.

Plus, editors and their equipment cost serious money. In comparison to what they ordinarily earn, many of my collaborators were working for free, or below-market rates, so I had to accommodate these career filmmakers’ availability. This stretched the process into weeks, months, and, finally, years. This complex project was all new to me, with the aspects of publicity and distribution still ongoing.

Now, I’m ecstatic that the film is finished, I’ve secured permission and licensing for (almost) everything in the movie, the soundtrack has been added, and, with a title change to *Lives Beyond Motion*, it’s listed on the professional movie website (IMDb.com). We’re still working on the

trailer, tweaking the poster and searching for places to share the results. With those challenges, another learning curve began. Here's a list of what other dance filmmakers might find instructive in the process:

1. Turns out, most of the dance film festivals want short dance films, not hour-long documentaries.
2. The general film festivals have limited time and space available, and curators program according to their audiences' preferences. Dance-based docs are not usually high on their lists, but my film has been welcomed, for instance, by a local Pride festival, and dance departments have shown interest.
3. The fees to submit the movie for screening consideration range from \$20-\$100, depending on the festival's own competitive reputation and on their own infrastructures. I'd budgeted for 10 submissions, but that was 10 years ago; rates have increased.
4. Festival timelines are not like live performances: you can't "rehearse 'til the curtain goes up." Once you're ready to submit, each festival has its own submission deadline. Then, they take up to six months to decide and, if your film is among those chosen, there are only few weeks before the potential screening. If your film is among the 15% of movies that fit into the festival's programming ideas and subsequent schedule, you can then tackle the next hurdle.
5. Some film festivals occur around the same time in the calendar, but are located hundreds, if not thousands, of miles apart. So, if selected by one...and, if you're lucky, by another...the chances that the film team can affordably attend both (or even, just one event) are slim.
6. With an ever-changing distribution landscape, film budgets are now expected to include significant sums for marketing, publicity and similar expenses. I hadn't done that.
7. I'm interested in sharing *Lives Beyond Motion* with college students across the country, but my movie competes with all the other curricular requirements for each course, and teachers only have so much time to cover their material, so that requires lots of coordination in advance.

But here's the great thing: movies have a longer shelf life than most live performances. Yes, some companies can keep dances alive in their repertory for many seasons, but those ensembles are few and far between. On the other hand, digital storytelling is available now and, as an historical phenomenon, forever.,

Let's hope.

Keith Glassman earned his MFA in Dance from UC Irvine in 1996, after dancing and choreographing in New York City. Still living in Southern California, he has a project-based ensemble that has performed in theaters, museums, community centers and site-specific environments in California and other states. Lives Beyond Motion is his first feature length film.