



A GOOD MADNESS: THE DANCE OF RACHEL BROWNE

Danielle Sturk, writer/director/producer
Oscar Fenoglio, cinematographer/editor/
original music

The title of Danielle Sturk's film, *A Good Madness: The Dance of Rachel Browne*, is inspired by something Browne, the founder of Winnipeg Contemporary Dancers, said during an interview. She describes herself as driven by an insatiable appetite for dance, but it is, she says, "a good madness."

Sturk's lens reveals a turbulent life journey driven by determination, talent and a great love of dance. With the very first image of tape coiling onto a vintage reel-to-reel tape recorder, Sturk captures, illuminates and places Browne — who was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1934, and died in her adopted country of Canada in 2012 — in a particular time in history.

One of the outstanding values of this 76-minute docu-dance is the care with which the Franco Manitoban filmmaker adapts some of Browne's best works for the film, shooting in site-specific locations, including *Mouvement* danced by Kristin Haight in a park in Winnipeg's French quarter. *Freddy*, set to Kurt Weill songs performed by Canadian soprano Teresa Stratas, was filmed in the city's iconic Fort Garry Hotel, complete with an emcee and audience dressed in period clothes, evoking a smoky 1930s German cabaret. Sporting a moustache, dancer Sharon B. Moore performs *Freddy* with vigour in this provocative solo that explores a broken but defiant character. It illustrates a side of Browne's creative genius that could be complicated, funny and cutting at the same time.

Sturk interviews Browne's three daughters, who describe the challenges of being raised by an often absent artist mother. Browne's

deep feelings of guilt as professional demands battled her children's needs were not untypical in the sixties. Yet her daughters speak fondly of their mother, who, instead of bedtime stories, would dance her grandchildren to sleep.

Interviews with artists from coast to coast indicate the importance of Browne in the Canadian dance scene. They also recall more turbulent times in the history of the country's first modern dance company, Winnipeg Contemporary Dancers, including when Browne was fired from her role as founding artistic director by her board.

Stephanie Ballard talks about her early years as a dancer on tour with Winnipeg Contemporary Dancers. Browne was infamous for her ability to give detailed notes to dancers anywhere, anytime and any place, and Ballard recounts travelling in an old school bus while Browne moved from seat to seat giving notes to each and every company member.

Faye Thomson — a co-director of the Professional Program of the School of Contemporary Dancers, which Browne founded — speaks of Browne's feminist nature being evident in the way she lived her life and in her later works celebrating the beauty,

strength and maturity of women. Browne herself tells us how, as a senior artist, she realized she had only so much time left, and chose to focus on new works made with and about women.

I was also interviewed in the film, having been mentored and supported by Ray (as Browne was known to her friends), first as a dancer in my twenties in Winnipeg, then, after moving to Victoria, British Columbia, as a choreographer. Ray and I shared a sympathy in how we saw, used and developed content for and about women. Through watching her work in the studio and being part of her creative process, I learned that dance can be created without the traditional trappings of gender. As a young woman in *Shout*, a feisty solo she created on me in the 1980s, I experienced for the first time what it is to be fully present, vulnerable and yet also powerful. Ray's movement for *Shout* was unadorned and kickass.

A Good Madness leaves us with an image of an artist — a strong feminist humanitarian — who was curious, able to laugh at herself, opinionated and always striving to embrace new ideas.

— CONSTANCE COOKE


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