

RESTLESS CREATURE

Monday, August 28, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by David Rooney / Hollywood Reporter Not Rated 93 Mins.

There's a tender image that speaks volumes near the end of *Restless Creature*, an intimate chronicle of New York City Ballet principal Wendy Whelan's emotional departure from the company that had been her professional home for 30 years. While Whelan works with choreographer Christopher Wheeldon and partner Tyler Angle in a small rehearsal room, developing a piece that will serve as the 47-year-old ballerina's farewell performance, a growing cluster of bunheads from the School of American Ballet watches rapt outside the door. They appear to be contemplating their own futures in a punishing field in which most careers are over by 40, their faces a flickering collision of admiration and apprehension.

That's not to infer that Whelan dances like somebody no longer in command. Even after undergoing hip reconstruction surgery and pushing herself hard through recuperative physical therapy, her sinewy body still moves with the angular grace and sensual intensity, the playfulness and dramatic complexity that made her such a distinctive star.

It's that resilience that makes this probing documentary portrait by producer-directors Linda Saffire and Adam Schlesinger so pleasurable. It focuses not on an artist in decline but on a woman of extraordinary strength and determination as she concedes to the dictates of time while figuring out a way to continue doing what she loves. In a presidential election year in which questions concerning "stamina" have been hurled at the female candidate like a dirty word, the film is inspiring. That factor alone should make it of interest to audiences beyond ballet aficionados, in home-screen formats and select theatrical dates.

With a half-laugh suggesting that she's aware of the self-dramatizing nature of the statement, Whelan early on confesses: "If I don't dance, I'd rather die — I've actually said that." The reality of a limited shelf life is arguably more unforgiving for ballet dancers than for artists in any other field, putting them in the same league as professional athletes. While Whelan had already shown more endurance than most in her City Ballet career by the time shooting on this documentary began, the honesty, anxiety and even the occasional humor with which she approaches its looming end date are quite moving.

A ballerina since she was three in Louisville, Kentucky, Whelan moved unaccompanied to New York to train at 15. (Photographs and footage of her dancing as a child and teenager are charming.) She joined City Ballet as an apprentice in 1984, becoming a company member in '86, a soloist in '89 and a principal dancer in '91. More than once, Whelan points out that she's been fortunate in remaining relatively pain- and injury-free throughout her long career, despite being diagnosed with scoliosis, which required her to wear a back brace to ballet class at age 12. However, the extended grace period ended in 2012 with a joint tear requiring hip surgery.

Whelan is a candid subject at every turn as she prepares to go on the operating table and then throughout her recovery, all the while wondering if the difficult decision about her retirement from City Ballet has been made for her by her body. Anyone versed in the ballet world — which means a large part of this film's audience — will know the outcome, and yet the filmmakers skillfully build an element of suspense.

Her farewell performance, with a piece titled *By 2 With & From*, created for Whelan by two of her most frequent choreographer collaborators, Wheeldon and Alexei Ratmansky, took place in fall 2014. It's recapped here with gorgeous footage from the ballet itself, but also of the stirring curtain calls, during which Whelan is swamped with roses, most touchingly receiving an individual stem from each of the company members as they flood the stage.

Eschewing talking heads for Whelan's own first-hand recollections and snatches of conversation between her and some of her many City Ballet colleagues, past and present, the film assembles a full-bodied appreciation of her contribution to the art and the profound respect she commands within the field. This is enhanced by thrilling footage from celebrated pieces by George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, Ratmansky and Wheeldon, among others, and pas de deux in which she dances with longtime stage partner Jock Soto, and then later with Angle and Craig Hall. But alongside the celebratory coverage is a frank account of the sadness for a prima ballerina at being gradually nudged out of the leading roles for which she was so acclaimed.

Refreshingly, Whelan chooses to dwell less on the sacrifices she has made and the losses of late-career transition than on the conviction that continuing to dance for her is simply a physiological need. The process by which she accepts the end of her tenure at City Ballet — while exploring new paths in modern dance, working with four young choreographers to develop the piece that gives this film its title — is both humbling and triumphant.

Aided by impeccable work from editor Bob Eisenhardt, co-directors Saffire and Schlesinger weave this extended diary into a narrative as fluid, committed and elegant in its movements as one of Whelan's performances. Perhaps the loveliest touch is a string of images over the end credits from Whelan's Instagram feed, validating her choices with evidence that she continues to perform *Restless Creature* and other post-City Ballet work at age 49 and into the future.



The WOMEN'S BALCONY

Monday, September 11, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Kenneth Turan / LA Times Not Rated 96 Mins.

It sounds paradoxical, but it's often true that the more culturally precise a foreign language film is, the more universal its appeal becomes. This is very much the case with the charming but pointed "The Women's Balcony."



A major box-office success in Israel, "The Women's Balcony" is so seemingly site-specific that even its driving force, screenwriter Shlomit Nehama, was surprised when it began succeeding overseas.

But culture aside, this is an unapologetically warmhearted comedic drama, a fine example of commercial filmmaking grounded in a persuasive knowledge of human behavior.

As the title indicates, "The Women's Balcony" is set in an Orthodox Jewish community in Jerusalem. But though that world may seem monolithic to outsiders, as Nehama and director Emil Ben-Shimon well understand, there is a genuine rift there, a clash of cultures often unspoken and unacknowledged that the film has adroitly mined.

At first, however, everything is supremely festive, as the members of a small neighborhood Orthodox community, the kind of close-knit group in which everyone inevitably knows everyone else's business, gather to celebrate the bar mitzvah of the grandson of

Under the leadership of a venerable but still beloved rabbi, things are going splendidly when a mishap strikes: The building's balcony, the place where women pray in sex-segregated Orthodox services, suddenly collapses, leaving the rabbi's wife hospitalized and the rabbi himself in retreat from reality.

Very much in disarray, the congregation finds a new temporary space in a location that makes finding a minyan, the 10 men needed for daily prayers, difficult. Enter the young and charismatic Rabbi David (Aviv Alush), a can-do individual who teaches at a local seminary and takes on the congregation's well-being as a personal project.

Rabbi David is so eager to help he even offers to cut through the annoying red tape and supervise the rebuilding of the collapsed synagogue.

"Thank the Creator," he modestly tells the grateful congregants. "I am only the messenger."

Discerning eyes will notice, however, that Rabbi David's dress marks him as ultra-Orthodox, while the congregation, whose female members do not cover their hair, is what might be called modern Orthodox: definitely observant but without the accompanying zealotry. That may seem like a small difference, but it turns out it is not.

Things get complicated when Rabbi David gives the men in the congregation a stirring speech about purity that does not go down well with the wives. Then the new rebuilt synagogue is unveiled and all hell breaks loose.

For under Rabbi David's supervision the airy balcony of old has been eliminated and the women are squeezed into a claustrophobic auxiliary space. And worse is yet to come.

But if the men think that the women will agree with Rabbi David that this is all an expression of God's will, they very quickly realize their mistake.

Screenwriter Nehama, who grew up in an Orthodox Jerusalem community like the one in the film, has said her goal was "to tell the story of the moderate people who are forced to deal with growing religious extremism," and "The Women's Balcony" definitely does that.

But Nehama has also said that she was inspired by British movies about the misadventures of small-town life, such as the charming "Waking Ned Devine," and the way she has made her serious societal points in an audience-friendly format is the key to this film's success.

Following the peregrinations of numerous characters, including the happily married Etti and Zion, Yaffa (Yafit Asulin), a young woman looking for a husband, and the tough-minded Tikva (top Israeli comedian Orna Banai), "Balcony" very much includes us in the community's warmth and caring.



As smoothly directed by Ben-Shimon, a filmmaker best known for his television work, and enlivened by a fine Ahuva Ozeri score, the plot twists can mostly be seen coming. But as performed by a cast of practiced farceurs, that is part of its charm.

When one character says, "Everyone should take care of his own account with God," that is a message that resonates as well.

In Hebrew with English subtitles.

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A FILM BY ERROL MORRIS
THE B-SIDE
 Elsa Dorfman's Portrait Photography

Monday, September 25, 7:30

Reviewed by Glenn Kenny / NY Times Rated R 76 Mins.

Errol Morris, the documentarian who is also a frequent contributor to The New York Times, works in such a wide range of subjects that he's difficult to pigeonhole. Still, it would not be entirely unfair to note that his best-known films of this century are portraits of major historical figures — specifically, two United States secretaries of defense. "The Fog of War," in 2003, featured the ruminations of Robert S. McNamara, who oversaw a large part of the Vietnam War, while "The Unknown Known," in 2013, examined Donald H. Rumsfeld and his part in the war in Iraq.



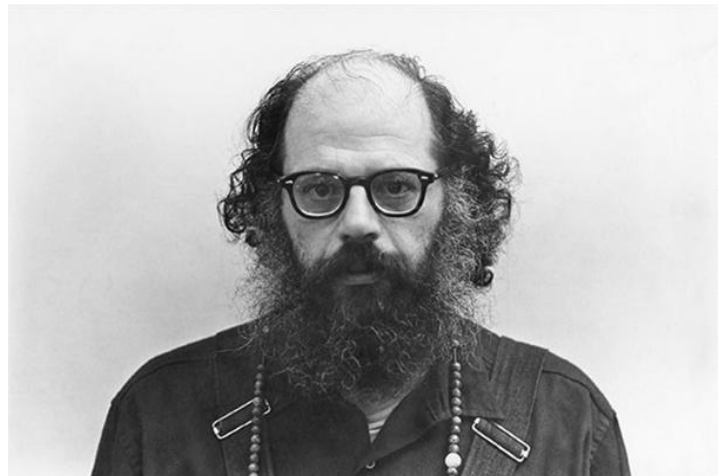
"The B-Side: Elsa Dorfman's Portrait Photography," Mr. Morris's new film, is a feature of modest length on a subject of seemingly modest import, particularly relative to those other movies. It begins with Ms. Dorfman herself, pattering among her files of photographs (and the documentary stays with her in this room for about 75 percent of its running time); she speaks at first of a large portrait of her husband, and the fluorescent vest she has sewn on his overcoat (he's wearing it in the picture) to keep him visible when he walks through streets at night while running errands. If you didn't know anything about Ms. Dorfman, who's 80, you might initially take her for a nice old lady with an unusual hobby — someone akin to the American eccentrics Mr. Morris portrayed in his early features, such as "Vernon, Florida" and "Gates of Heaven."

But you would be wrong, and this is part of the point that Mr. Morris makes, quietly, with this enjoyable but also profound movie. Part of Mr. Morris's reputation as a great documentary filmmaker is derived from his friendly-seeming but pressing interview technique, but here, when he's heard, he speaks to Ms. Dorfman as a friend, and she responds to him with warm reminiscences of her beginnings as a photographer.

She speaks of living in New York City in the late '50s as a single woman, and of working as a secretary at the publisher Grove Press, where she met the poet Allen Ginsberg, a lifelong friend. She relocated to Cambridge, Mass., and worked at Grolier Poetry Bookshop, all the while snapping pictures of the luminaries she met there and, perhaps more crucially, of herself and her home life. In 1974 she published "Elsa's Housebook — A Woman's Photojournal," a milestone in both American photography and feminist art.

Eventually, a combination of luck and persistence led to her setting up a portrait studio equipped with a Polaroid camera that produced 20-inch-by-24-inch prints. Because of the nature of the instantly developing film, Ms. Dorfman would take only two shots of her customers, and allow them to choose which one they wanted to leave with. She kept the other — hence the movie's title.

Mr. Morris made this portrait in the aftermath of Polaroid's discontinuation of its large-format film and Ms. Dorfman's subsequent retirement. "Elsa, do you think the camera tells the truth?" he asks. "Absolutely not," she says with a laugh. Later, though, as she pauses in her descriptions of the pictures she pulls from her files, she speaks of "how many people are dead, and how many people struggled," and you can feel how her work has revealed some truths about that.



Ms. Dorfman emerges as an artist of deep compassion, empathy, humor and wisdom. During a montage of photographs of Ginsberg, he is heard in a late-'50s audio recording reading his great poem "America." Lines like "America when will you end the human war" and "America why are your libraries full of tears" resonate with a particular poignancy even today, as does "America when will you be angelic." "The B-Side" is a portrait of a genuine American angel.

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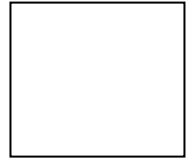
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A rectangular advertisement for the Riverwalk Fine Art Fair. On the left side, there is a detailed black and white illustration of a bouquet of various flowers, including roses, lilies, and sunflowers, with a small butterfly perched on one of the blooms. To the right of the illustration, the text reads: 'RIVERWALK FINE ART FAIR', 'September 16 & 17', '10 am - 5 pm', 'Main & Jackson in Downtown Naperville', and '630.355.2530'.

RESTLESS CREATURE

"'Restless Creature' shows the reality of life after ballet superstardom."

Vogue

Monday, August 28 at 7:30 pm

"Joyous!"

Variety

Monday, September 11 at 7:30 pm



A FILM BY ERROL MORRIS

THE B-SIDE

Elsa Dorfman's Portrait Photography

"Intimate and fittingly positive... Errol Morris is a master craftsman."

Sight & Sound

Monday, September 25 at 7:30 pm