



La Danse: Le Ballet de l'Opéra de Paris

Directed by: Frederick Wiseman

©: Idéale Audience, Zipporah Films

In co-production with: Opéra National de Paris

In association with: Public Broadcasting Service

Production Assistance Provided by: Florence Gould Foundation, Pershing Square Foundation, TPS Star, Showgate, Planète Câble, YLE Co-productions

With the assistance of: Le Fresnoy - Studio national
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CNC - Centre national de la cinématographie

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Producer (Zipporah Films): Frederick Wiseman

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Photographed by: John Davey

Lighting (Genus): Lucy Carter

Lighting (Casse-Noisette): Rui de Matos Machado

Lighting (Paquita): Philippe Albaric

Lighting (Roméo et Juliette): David Finn

Lighting (La Maison de Bernarda): Jorgen Jansson

Lighting (Orphée et Eurydice): Rolf Börzik

2nd Camera (Paquita): Dick Pope

Video (Genus): Ravi Deepres

Edited by: Frederick Wiseman, Valérie Pico

Sets (Genus): Vicki Mortimer

Sets (Casse-Noisette): Nicholas Georgiadis

Sets (Paquita): Luisa Spinatelli

Sets (Roméo et Juliette): Thomas Schenk, Sasha Waltz

Sets (La Maison de Bernarda): Merie-Louise Ekman

Sets (Orphée et Eurydice): Rolf Börzik

Sets (Le Songe de Médée): Thierry Leproust

Costumes (Genus): Vicki Mortimer

Costumes (Casse-Noisette): Nicholas Georgiadis

Costumes (Paquita): Luisa Spinatelli

Costumes (Roméo et Juliette): Bernd Skodzig

Costumes (Orphée et Eurydice): Rolf Börzik

Costumes (Le Songe de Médée): Gilles Rosier

Costumes (La Maison de Bernarda):

Merie-Louise Ekman

Title/Credit Design: Fabien Lehalle

Music (Genus): Joby Talbot, Deru

Music (Casse-Noisette): Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Music (Paquita): Edouard Marie Deldevez, Ludwig Minkus

Music Adapted by (Paquita): David Coleman

Music (Roméo et Juliette): Hector Berlioz

Music (La Maison de Bernarda):

Johann Sebastian Bach

Music (Orphée et Eurydice):

Christoph Willibald Gluck

Dance-Opera by (Orphée et Eurydice): Pina Bausch

Music (Le Songe de Médée): Mauro Lanza

Music Performed by (Casse-Noisette):

The Orchestra of the Paris National Opera

Music Performed by (Paquita): Orchestra Colonne

Music Performed by (Roméo et Juliette):

The Orchestra of the Paris National Opera, Choir of the Paris National Opera

Frederick Wiseman

La Danse: Le Ballet de l'Opéra de Paris

Performance has been a concern of legendary documentarist Frederick Wiseman ever since his 1967 debut *Titicut Follies*, titled after the revue put on by prisoners and guards at the mental asylum explored in the film. With his latest documentary *La Danse: Le Ballet de l'Opéra de Paris*, Wiseman turns his all-seeing eye and organising intelligence on the most evanescent of arts. The repertoire observed in rehearsal ranges from *The Nutcracker* to modern choreographers Angelin Preljocaj and Pina Bausch, from almost Busby Berkeley-esque tutu lines to tense, spare manoeuvres and techno scores. ‘It’s a long tradition,’ says Wiseman. ‘While they’re doing both modern and classic ballet, it’s in the context of a tradition of 300 years.’

La Danse is therefore a twofold chronicle: on the one hand, there’s the breathtaking intimacy and immediacy of the physical movement; on the other, we are watching an artwork being given final shape by dancers under exacting direction – and, in the process, a mainstay of Western high culture being maintained. Wiseman believes in the connections between this sublime art and life: ‘Each ballet is an abstraction based on some human experience or fantasy. You just have to go down the ladder of abstraction a little, and you’re back at sometimes very common human experience.’

Wiseman, a balletomane who previously filmed the American Ballet Theatre for his 1995 film *Ballet*, presents the artistic process in action: repetition and revision, conception and execution. ‘I have enormous respect for the people who devote their lives to producing something that’s so moving and so beautiful – and that disappears instantly,’ he says. But for a director who most recently delved behind the scenes of Idaho government in *State Legislature* (2007), the institution is just as heavenly a body as the thoroughbreds on display, so we also go to the office and see how the company is run. The multitalented artistic director dickers with donors, susses out rising dancers, defends costs and gently counsels a choreographer on casting. Elsewhere in the building, a janitor sweeps and a costumer stitches.

Speaking of cutting, this is Wiseman’s first Avid-edited work, though he shot on Super 16, just as with *Ballet* and his other French embed, *La Comédie-Française* (1996). He shoots from an engaged distance that allows for full appreciation of the bodies in motion, neither framing the movement like filmed theatre nor attempting to funkily integrate camerawork and choreography. Something similar occurs in the editing: Wiseman’s willingness to run long sequences shows us the thought and movement in a given dance evolving before our eyes, while the Paris Ballet’s varied rehearsal spaces yield subtle echoes in mirrors and architectural curves. ‘I found that the rehearsals were often more moving than the performances, because sometimes they reached a level in the rehearsals that was absolutely extraordinary,’ he says. ‘It’s because they’re trying all the time.’

As in Wiseman’s previous films, people are not identified by explanatory captions, but we come to know certain choreographers and dancers via their instructional styles and varieties of physical virtuosity. Especially entertaining and enlightening are a radio-show-like pair who direct a young dancer while tossing off erudite references. (They are, Wiseman tells me, ‘former star dancer Pierre Lacotte and his wife Ghislaine Thesmar, an étoile of the Paris Opera Ballet.’)

Devoting more attention to the beauty of movement than to Wiseman’s usual goal of dissecting an ecosystem, the unadorned images of *La Danse* find a suitable epigraph in the notes given to one dancer during the film: that in order to feel, explanation is not necessary.

Nicolas Rapold, *Sight and Sound*, November 2009

Institutions are the venerable and prolific documentarian Frederick Wiseman’s stock in trade. Since the long-banned *Titicut Follies* (1967), he’s been turning his level, rigorously unsentimental eye on a huge variety of American institutions through 30-

Music Performed by (Orphée et Eurydice):
Balthasar-neumann Ensemble and Choir
Music Performed by (Le Songe de Médée):
Ensemble Court-Circuit
Music Performed by (Bach/Maison de B):
Karl Richter
Music Performed by (Trad Span Mus/MdB):
Narciso Yepes
Choreography (La Maison de Bern): Mats Ek
Choreographers: Emanuel Gat, Pierre Lacotte
Choreographer (Genus): Wayne McGregor
Choreography (Le Songe de Médée):
Angelin Preljocaj
Choreography (Casse-Noisette): Rudolf Noureev
Choreography (Paquita): Pierre Lacotte
Choreography From (Paquita): Joseph Mazilier,
Marius Petipa
Choreography (Roméo et Juliette): Sasha Waltz
Choreography/Staging (Orphée et Eurydice):
Pina Bausch
Assistant Choreographer (La Maison de Bernarda):
Mariko Aoyama
Assistant Choreographer (Orphée et Eurydice):
Dominique Mercy
Sound by: Frederick Wiseman
Mix: Emmanuel Croset
Sound Editor: Hervé Guyader
Translation: Marie-Pierre Duhamel Muller
France-USA-Japan-Finland 2009©
158 mins
Digital

The screening on Sat 17 Jan will be introduced by
dance writer and critic Judith Mackrell

Frederick Wiseman

Ballet

Sun 4 Jan 12:15; Sat 17 Jan 17:40

La Danse: Le Ballet de l'Opéra de Paris

Sat 10 Jan 14:50; Sat 17 Jan 14:15 (+ intro by
dance writer and critic Judith Mackrell)

Ex Libris: The New York Public Library

Sun 11 Jan 14:40; Sun 18 Jan 14:40

The Store

Tue 13 Jan 18:00 (+ intro by season curator
Sandra Hebron); Mon 19 Jan 20:35

National Gallery

Sun 25 Jan 15:00; Sat 31 Jan 14:40

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plus films, from high school, zoo, department store and the army to an intensive-care unit in the immersive six-hour *Near Death* (1989).

Since so much of Wiseman's work has quietly nailed organisations as either dysfunctional, morally careless or simply swamped by the social problems they face, *La Danse*'s close, appreciative, often exhilarating picture of the Paris Opera Ballet working at the peak of its powers feels like a departure for him. He's ridden shotgun with a dance company before – tracking the American Ballet Theatre for *Ballet* (1995) – and he examined another iconic French troupe at length in *La Comédie-Française* (1996). *La Danse* reflects themes from both films. This superb, utterly engrossing piece manages to dissect both an institution and an artform with extraordinary skill and beauty.

Wiseman confesses himself fascinated by the evanescence of dance, and the film focuses closely on the total consecration of both dancers and company to creating the transient beauty of performance and honing it to excellence. How do they do it? Work, is the short answer. The meat of *La Danse* consists of layer after layer of closely observed rehearsals for the seven pieces of the 2008 season, which range from the modern athleticism of Wayne McGregor's *Genus*, through the demandingly expressive *Le Songe de Médée*, to the traditional classicism of *The Nutcracker* and *Paquita*, with their rigorously drilled set pieces. Wiseman, his camera mysteriously invisible in the studio mirrors that refract the dancers, concentrates closely on the repetitive working-out of steps and sequences, as choreographers and dancers bind together in a chivvy, relentless search for perfection.

Wiseman's trademark *cinéma vérité* style – which has no truck with voiceovers, captions or score, no timescale or protagonist, no narrative laid out – keeps our attention usefully, hypnotically locked on the dancers' bodies. Watching star Laetitia Pujol fail repeatedly to perform a step ('She imagines an arabesque where there is none,' snickers her partner) or seeing Marie-Agnès Gillot and Benjamin Pech trying endless variations on the fiendish contortions of *Genus* with its maker, the film becomes a paean not just to the discipline of the dancers but to the process of development. One that involves the entire building, whose costume-makers and lighting crew appear as single-minded as the agile, steely artistic director Brigitte Lefèvre, who insists that 'everyone must unite around the work.' Granted, those Wisemaniacs who prize the *comédie humaine* aspects of his work, the absurdities, grimness or memorable grotesqueries (*Primate's monkey masturbator*, say) may be perturbed by the absorbed approval of its subject that the film emanates. But it's no documercial, since Wiseman is alert to the fiercely hierarchical nature of the organisation (where the only Black people glimpsed are cleaners or painters, their rhythmic movements echoing those of the dancers), to the pressures on an ageing dancer pleading for fewer roles or a young one crippling herself with self-doubt. This is a portrait of a human hive, and there's even, fittingly, a beehive on the roof, which the film visits with the same intense stare it gives to pools of light on the long dark corridors of the Palais Garnier.

Wiseman's concentration (and ours) pays off thrillingly once we finally see the dancers perform, shot seamlessly from the wings and stalls, the rote and wrangling of rehearsal adding layers of meaning. On stage, he shows how performance makes the dancer's body uniquely eloquent, with the sinuous *Genus pas de deux* closing a circle that began with Wayne McGregor's deliciously inarticulate 'da-da-da-oumh' instructions to a bemused ballerina. The tour de force however is *Médée*, which choreographer Angelin Preljocaj has painstakingly encouraged his dancers to put their own imprint on. Wiseman captures Delphine Moussin's dazed murderer, awash with buckets of blood, creating something gloriously visceral and unexpected, prowling on all fours to her children's corpses. *La Danse*, which has patiently unwrapped and illuminated the months of unremitting toil behind every piece, captures the moment when the work becomes transfigured, as dazzlingly as any prima ballerina.

Kate Stables, *Sight and Sound*, May 2010