

Richard Alaniz, KPFK Film Club

KPFK Film Club Review: BELLA

BELLA (beautiful/pretty in Italian and Spanish). The word could be referring to dancer Bella Lewitzky's beauty, her athletic willowy limbs, waving like tall reeds in the wind. "Qué bella!" is perhaps what you'd hear as an audience member witnessing one of Lewitzky's forty-six dance works. One might be applauding the fierceness of Lewitzky's activism, as when she stood up to the House Un-American Activities Committee and the National Endowment for the Arts on behalf of creative freedom and expression. The legacy that Bella bequeathed to her dance students, during years of teaching at the Idyllwild Arts Academy, LA's Dance Associates, the Lewitzky Dance Company, and CalArts, is quite beautiful. There's pop beauty in her motion picture work, cultural beauty in the way her artistry in LA defied New York's claim as the center for dance in America, and domestic beauty in her 64-year marriage to dancer-turned-architect-turned dance set designer, Newell Reynolds.

Overall, what dancer/producer/director Bridget Murnane's fabulous new documentary convincingly demonstrates, is that the life of Bella Lewitzky was indeed creative and, yes, appears to have been beautifully and magnificently lived.

Her early years seem inauspicious, living with her Russian-Jewish immigrant parents in a Mojave Desert socialist utopian colony, and later, at a chicken ranch in San Bernadino. When the latter failed in 1934, she went with her father to look for work in LA, where she began her association with dancer/choreographer Lester Horton.

In 1940, she married fellow Horton dancer Newell Taylor, who later designed some of Bella's sets. As the company's lead dancer, she helped develop the Horton Technique, and, in 1946, she, Newell, and Lester co-founded the Dance Theater of Los Angeles. After 16 years of working with Horton, she struck out on her own, due to creative differences.

Bella had been appearing in, and choreographing, such Hollywood features as WHITE SAVAGE, BAGHDAD, TRIPOLI, TARZAN, and ALI BABA AND THE FORTY THIEVES, when she was called before HUAC as a communist, in 1951. Her refusal to cooperate got her blacklisted, and so, from 1951 to 1964, she turned to teaching modern dance at Dance Associates, her dance school. Nora, her daughter, was born in 1955.

From 1956 to 1972, Bella also taught at the Idyllwild School of Music and the Arts. Her Lewitzky Dance Company, founded in 1966 (when Bella was 50), became an international sensation, performing in forty-three US states and twenty countries on five continents; it flourished for 31 years. She served as the founding dean of the dance program at the California Institute of the Arts (1969-72). In 1991 she won a suit against the National Endowment for the Arts, who tried to force her to sign an anti-obscenity pledge in order to get funding, part of the conservative government's attempt to limit creative freedom. Before her death in 2004 at the age of 88, Bella had received numerous awards, including six honorary doctorates, and the 1996 National Medal of Arts, presented by President Clinton.

Bella's own recorded interviews, photos, archival video, and comments from students, fellow dancers, and others, keep this history fascinating, illuminating, and quickly moving. Most wondrously, we are treated to snippets of over 20 of her dance works...expressive, graceful and innovative modern dance pieces such as Inscape, Spaces Between, Kinaesonata, On The Brink of Time, Horton Floor Exercises, and Greening, the last group dance choreographed by Lewitzky in which she included herself. We are also let in on the creative and ideological concepts behind some of these works, and watch her in action, guiding students and dancers.

It's hard to imagine a more fitting film for opening night at a Los Angeles Festival. Bella Lewitzky's life and work successfully helped put the city on the global map for modern dance, while competing with ballet companies who have traditionally been awarded all such recognition. Moreover, the dances themselves are treasures that will perfectly put you in the mood for celebrating the beautiful marriage between the complementary arts of cinema and dance, at the Dance Camera West Festival.

The L.A. Premiere of BELLA occurs at the Dance Camera West Festival, Thursday, January 19, 7:30 pm, at the @ Barnsdall Gallery Theatre, 4800 Hollywood Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90027. FREE onsite parking! Info at: <http://www.dancecamerawest.org/>

Get more info about the film here: <https://www.bellasfilm.com/>

Enjoy the trailer

here: https://vimeo.com/684831514?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=70506739