

ReelDance Retrospective

Dance (Lens), Dancehouse, Melbourne

Curatorial Essay

By Erin Brannigan

This program of dancefilms represents a certain and specific period of work in this field in Melbourne 2000-2012 when, as elsewhere in Australia and the rest of the world, a new genre of short films called dancescreen appeared. Such films were being commissioned by broadcasters, supported by arts funding bodies, self-funded by choreographers and directors, and filled bespoke events and festivals that formed an international touring platform for the work. This new form was important in raising the visibility of dance and dance artists, but was also understood as a new intermedial art form that encompassed documentaries and referenced video art as it had emerged since mid-twentieth-century, as well as other screen forms such as music video. Academic books and articles were written, a journal set-up, media reviewed festivals such as Australia's ReelDance International dance Screen Festival, and other national programs such as the exhibition [24 Frames Per Second](#) at Carriageworks in 2015 kept the art form visible.

Dance screen had previously appeared in programs at Performance Space and Dancehouse since the 1990s; Steps 1 1994, Next Steps 1995, Intersteps 1996 and Antistatic 1997 at Performance Space, and Dance Lumiere 1997, 1998, 1999, Bodyworks on Screen 2000 at Dancehouse, (the latter 2 in partnership with Cinemedia). These programs involved curators Mathew Bergan, Tracie Mitchell, Leisa Shelton, Michelle Mahrer and myself (I curated my first dance screen program for Performance Space in 1997 and Dancehouse in 1998). It is hard to imagine the ReelDance films presented here existing without the cultural context of Dancehouse, Arts House and ACMI where ReelDance was presented, and the excellent coverage of [RealTime](#) that provided a discursive container for the works. **In fact, the Dancehouse building at 150 Princes St, North Carlton, features in 3 of the films in this program.**

Throughout the early 2000s, the shift to installation work followed live dance into the gallery and museum, but things went a little quiet internationally until a revival in the early 2020s driven, to a large extent, by the hyper-visibility of dance online throughout and following the Covid-19 pandemic. Recent programs include the primarily online Dance Cinema programming, [Flow](#) in Adelaide 2022, and [RealReel](#) at the Substation in Melbourne in 2022. Dance (Lens) at Dancehouse in Melbourne has been programming events since 2020 and throughout the pandemic and has become a hub for local makers with its workshops and industry events as well as a connection to the international scene through partnerships. I am very honoured to have been asked to create a Melbourne retrospective of ReelDance for Dance (Lens) 2025.

ReelDance ran from 2000-2012, and over its 12 years it encouraged and supported a rich field of practice at the dance-screen interface. ReelDance played an important role in defining the field both nationally and internationally. It was an international festival and installation program (in alternating years) that partnered with organisations across Australia and New Zealand and toured to 12 cities at its peak. International partners included Videodanza in Barcelona, Napolidanza in Naples, Cinedans in Amsterdam, Monaco Dance Forum, Tempo in Christchurch, and dança em foco in Brazil. Funded by the Australia Council for the Arts, Create NSW, NSWFTO and Screen Australia, it supported new work through commissions and workshops, and hosted mentors such as Miriam King, Pascal Magnin, Wim Vandekeybus, Margie Medlin, Miranda Pennell, Thierry de Mey, Katrina McPherson, Simon Fildes and David Hinton. It's [*collection*](#) is archived at UNSW Library.

Screendance can often give an indication of the direction in which live dance can be heading in a local scene due to its relative ease of production; a general sense of what's relevant, what's needed and where we are as a broad community. The filmmakers, choreographers and dancers in the films represent a cross-section of those involved in the Melbourne dance scene during this period, including both independent artists and companies. For this reason alone they hold value for Australian arts community and screening the films to an audience brings past communities of creativity into the present ones. The films themselves demonstrate an attention to cinematic languages and traditions, informed avant-garde approaches, and some assumptions and challenges regarding what constitutes 'dance' or 'choreography' in relation to both techniques of the body *and* filmmaking. Hopefully they will inspire more excellent work in this field from Melbourne artists.

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