

## MOMENT OF LIGHT: THE DANCE OF EVELYN HART

Blue Morpho Films  
Directed by Gordon Reeve

by Robert Enright

IT SEEMS THAT EVELYN HART has become something of a critical cottage industry in Canada — a profile opening the *Globe and Mail's* entertainment section, a biography by one of this country's most distinguished dance critics, a feature interview in *Border Crossings* are only the most recent in a growing list of media events paying attention to the dancer who is easily the most successful graduate of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet organization.

Now filmmaker Gordon Reeve has added his name and medium to the list chronicling the life and dancing times of Evelyn Hart. It's an impressive and captivating addition. Reeve and his camera have followed Hart from Munich to Winnipeg and from there to Paris and in the process has managed to capture the exotic appeal of those European cities. A shot of the rooftops of the City of Light in which the Eiffel Tower rises like an apparition out of the background is especially compelling. But the success of the film lies less in centres of culture than in the central situations it reveals. Reeve goes into Hart's dressing room and onto rehearsal stages where she and her male partners work the technique that she counts on in her quest for the perfect, transcendent performance.

Dancing, for Hart, is a consuming passion that leaves time and concentration for little else. Throughout the film her language gives away this preoccupation; getting to know a partner well enough to dance with him is "being intimate, like a marriage" and not surprisingly she refers to the dance that emerges from this on-stage relationship as their "child." I'm aware that all this sounds vaguely clichéd and it's one of the limitations of my writing that I'm unable to convey the conviction with which she makes such utterances. One of the things that *Moment of Light* makes clear is that Hart's life on stage is what she lives for and what happens once the orchestra stops playing and the lights go down is of considerably less interest to her. Hart says as much herself. "I really believe that's what acting is. Acting is living for the moment on the stage."

The implications of this admission make for some of the film's most poignant moments. She performs *Romeo and Juliet* with Kader Belarbi, an *étoile* with the Paris Opera, and we see the superficial contact they have once the dancing stops. It's a case of the performance meats coldly furnishing forth the post-performance tables. What generates the poignancy is the discrepancy between the heat of the dance and its indifferent aftermath. In the rehearsal scenes the film captures a process of almost alchemical magic; Hart — without the seductions of lights, costume or make-up — is able to become Juliet in front of our eyes. She carries on her shoulders all the excitement and fragility of the doomed Capulet like a shiver. When she and Belarbi work out how best to manage the kiss from the balcony scene we are shown the mechanics of ballet and character acting, but nothing prepares us for the conviction of the act, either in the rehearsal scene

or in the performance. Reeve has the combination of good sense and respect for dance that makes him run lengthy sections of the ballets themselves, so that we are able to watch the dross of rehearsal being transformed into the gold of performance.

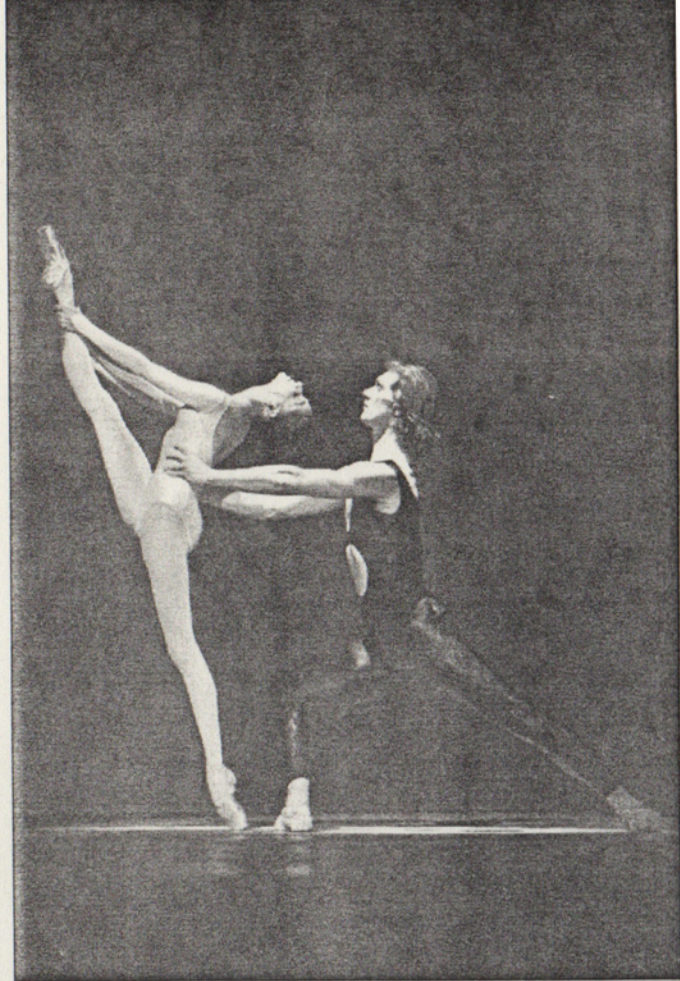
So much of the strength of the film comes out of the revelations it offers us into the high-stake world of dance. I mean, of course, high-stakes for the ego, although it appears as if Hart's guesting for ballet companies all over the world has probably made her mortgage payments relatively easy to meet. There is one scene which shows the dance she must do among the egos of her partners if she's to maximize their contributions to her own success. She rehearses *Romeo and Juliet* in Paris with Monsieur Belarbi under the benevolent eye of her coach, former partner and Associate Director of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Andre Lewis. Also watching and crumpled up in his chair, arms folded across his chest like a belligerent schoolboy, is Rex Harrington, a mere twinkle in the international dance firmament. He is in Paris to give advice to Kader Belarbi about the role that has become a signature piece for he and Evelyn. He is not happy; he has to leave the rehearsal early and does so after only perfunctory applause. But what's fascinating is to watch Evelyn looking after both their egos. For his part Mr. Lewis, who is Hart's old friend, seems content to tell Mr. Harrington that his bruised plumage is still pretty. Later in the film in another dressing room scene (you could call these sections of the documentary *Truth or Kader*) she tells Harrington he was "great — I noticed you were holding back" — at which stage he teasingly informs her that he had no intention of revealing all of his secrets to his dancing rival.

Hart is an outrageous flirt in

these scenes, especially when she rehearses the role of Esmeralda with her dream partner, Manuel Legris. It seems fair; earlier in Paris while she rehearses the role of Juliet, Legris has sized her up from the wings in a way that would make Valentino seem innocent; his interest in her aesthetic potential is positively lewd. These scenes reveal moments of skill and serendipity on the part of Reeve and his cinematographer and probably a bit of luck too — a case of being in the right place at what must seem to some viewers as the wrong time.

But there are other moments in the film which are beautifully realized, moments where Reeve is able to make art out of the exigencies of documentary. In his other life he is a professor of sculpture at the University of Manitoba and his appreciation of space plays through the film in salutary ways. He likes to urge the film towards moments of visual abstraction, so that dancers will suddenly be obscured by a rising scrim, or only their silhouettes will be evident dancing in a space as pure as the colours on a palette board. In Munich, Evelyn and Constanza Vernon, the Artistic Director of the Bavarian State Opera where Evelyn is a principal dancer, are on stage only as shadows. Once they move off stage we are left with a simple yellow and black screen, a space that has the richness and clarity of a painting by Blinky Palermo. Visually, *Moment of Light* is a very elegant film; the editing is crisp, the dance sequences are charged with the specific energy of performance and the insight into Evelyn Hart's personality is profound. It permits us inside a world of unusual beauty and pain, of immeasurable highs and almost crippling lows and makes us aware, in a way I've not yet seen in a film on Canadian dance, what are the costs of going after perfection.

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There are occasions when Gordon Reeve's film portrait is almost too painful to watch. At various times it seems to sweat and weep. It makes clear that Evelyn Hart's ability is a gift that cuts two ways: because she can make great art she wants to go further and make perfect art. As a consequence, *Moment of Light* is able to exquisitely document the dark shadows that come out of her compulsion to trip the light fantastic. ■

(Robert Enright is a writer and broadcaster who works with *24 Hours* in Winnipeg, where he also co-edits *Border Crossings*, a magazine of art and

**Filmed over a five-month period in three countries, *Moment of Light* tracks the life of Evelyn Hart to give a rare glimpse of the ballerina's inner motivation. Partnered here by Robert Maccherndl, she dances *Klavierkonzert Es-dur* choreographed by Uwe Scholtz for Munich's Bayerische Staatsballett.**