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Movie Review

Canner inspires, heals with movement

By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

When I'm feeling unhappy, I dance around my kitchen. It helps. Movement can flush out fears and frustrations and reconnect you to the larger world. The body can help heal the heart.

Norma Canner knows that. As a child, she cried a lot. She's not sure why. As a grown-up, she has helped hundreds of others through their tears - through movement. Her career is the subject of a remarkable new feature-length documentary film, "A Time to Dance," that will be screened tonight and tomorrow at the Harvard Film Archive.

Filmmakers/collaborators Ian Brownell and Webb Wilcoxon persuaded the renowned actress Ruby Dee to narrate the film, which is one in a series they've done on pioneers in art therapy. "Pioneer" certainly describes Canner, who has broken ground in treating people once written off by society - the blind, the deaf, the paralyzed, the mentally handicapped.

Despite my own experience of the soothing effect of movement, at the beginning of the film I was skeptical of the touchy-feely aspects of Canner's calling. By the end, I was sold. Canner comes across as part Dr. Ruth, part Peter Pan, using percussion instruments and yards of floating fabrics to introduce students and patients to the possibilities of self-expression. She's no goody-goody: When one child expresses a desire to "chop up people," she lets the whole group of kids clobber invisible victims. "It felt good to them," she says. "It felt good to me, too. It got rid of a lot of tension."

Canner's career has been as improvisational as the movement she champions. She certainly didn't set out to become a dance therapist when she graduated from Brook-

Dance therapist Norma Canner treated people once written off by society - the blind, the deaf, the paralyzed, the mentally handicapped - emphasizing the joy of what they could do rather than their limitations.

A TIME TO DANCE

At: the Harvard Film Archive, Cambridge

line High School in 1937 and moved to New York. Acting was her goal, and she had some success both in road shows and on Broadway before she traded career for marriage to Leonard Canner, her childhood sweetheart. By the end of World War II she had two children and "no creative place for myself," she says.

She found one - through Barbara Mettler, an advocate of spontaneous expression and the notion that everyone can dance, that dance isn't the domain of a talented few. Brownell and Wilcoxon have incorporated old footage of Mettler and her students in their film, footage that documents the freedom and creativity those rebel dancers achieved.

Mettler wasn't interested in dance as therapy, though. Canner discovered that on her own. She was teaching in Toledo, Ohio, where her family had relocated, and preach-

ing Mettler's "anyone can dance" gospel. A woman challenged that idea by bringing in her daughter, who had cerebral palsy. Canner worked with that child and other sufferers, emphasizing the joy of what they could do rather than their limitations.

After her family moved back to Boston, she worked in a state school for developmentally disabled youngsters. She was told they had very short attention spans, that they wouldn't last more than 20 minutes. "That was a lot of baloney," she says, "because they were fully engaged." Photographs of the children using wastebaskets as drums, pounding away passionately, bear her out.

In the 1970s and '80s Canner taught at Lesley College in Cambridge, helping to train future dance therapists, bringing her students to institutions including the Perkins School for the Blind. There she helped people who couldn't see to feel their way through space, to stop using their bodies as armor against the world.

She helps the emotionally traumatized, too, acting as a soulmate on the journey from darkness into light. "I don't believe in retreating from someone's pain," she says, words that accompany scenes of her holding a wailing woman.

Friends, family, and colleagues offer their insights to her success. "The quality of a civilization," says one, "is measured by what it does for its least able, most handicapped, most in-need members. Norma operates on that contention."

Canner herself - now 80 and still teaching all over the world - puts it more modestly. "People cure themselves," she says. "But a witness is what we need."

"A Time to Dance" tonight and tomorrow at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$6 for the general public, \$5 for students and seniors. For information, call 617-776-9090.