

Canner bio is grand time of her life

By KAREN CAMPBELL

Anyone who has skipped across a dance floor or boogied in the back yard can attest to the invigorating and cathartic power of dance.

Few, however, have helped others to feel the extraordinary physical and emotional

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release of creative movement as brilliantly and zealously as Cambridge dance therapist Norma Canner. For more than four decades, she has made movement a vital therapeutic tool for tapping into the human psyche.

The new "A Time to Dance: The Life and Work of Norma Canner" by filmmakers Ian Brownell and Webb Wilcoxon (premiering at Harvard Film Archive Monday and Tuesday) chronicles Canner's remarkable story in an inspiring, informative and profoundly moving documentary that serves as an eloquent testament to the healing power of dance.

The 75-minute film, narrated by Ruby Dee and using a wide range of old and new footage, traces Canner's life from an unhappy childhood through her early career as an actress in left-wing theater and in bit parts on Broadway. Then, like many women of her generation, she gave up her career to be a wife and full-time mother, but at a significant cost to her need for a creative outlet.

"I was feeling very depressed," she said in a recent interview. "It was probably postpartum depression, but in those days you were just supposed to shape up. I felt that being home all the time was very isolating and I had nothing creative in my life."

A friend persuaded Canner to join her at a Creative Movement class taught by dance pioneer Barbara Mettler and it became a turning point in Canner's life. The idea that natural movement could tap into the creative powers of nearly anyone came as a revelation.

"It's not intellectual," said

"A Time to Dance: The Life and Work of Norma Canner." Not rated. At Harvard Film Archive Monday and Tuesday.

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Canner. "If you go in your head, it goes away. It's very primal. We are all born moving creatures and we get stopped along the way by our culture and taught to hold in . . . creative dance; all dance is therapeutic."

When her husband moved the family to Ohio, Canner joined a women's dance group and began teaching dance at a community center. "The women talked a lot about themselves and their feelings after each class," Canner said. "One woman said, 'You know, you're doing group therapy.'"

It was then that Canner began to see that dance was not only therapeutic, but could be used as specific therapy, as a way of "rekindling body memories to connect with our deepest emotions." She was asked to adapt her basic knowledge to the mental patients at the state hospital and was gratified at the response there, both from patients and medical professionals. This evolved into teacher workshops and working with the disabled and children.

She established a pilot program in Massachusetts through the Department of Mental Health resulting in the development of 14 statewide centers where preschool teachers and aides received training in dance modality. In 1972, she originated the Dance Therapy Department at Lesley College, and she has since gone on to international prominence in the field.

What radiates in the film, through compelling footage of a range of sessions over the years, is Canner's warmth and charisma, eliciting tremendous trust from those with whom she works. The raw emotion is palpable, and the filmmakers have beautifully captured Canner's tremendous energy and nurturing spirit, which, as they so aptly put it, "inspires even the most reluctant to take the risks that give them the power to heal."