

**An Interview by Robert Dupree with Director Claire Soares on her Film  
*Ben Stevenson: A Choreographer & his Muses***

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**Robert Dupree:** What is your film on Ben Stevenson, ballet choreographer, about?

**Claire Soares:** The film portrays various elements of ballet that one never sees in a performance. It is really a "in his (their) own words commentary on a great ballet choreographer's life and work, kind of like "The Fog of War," except this is about ballet. In staged ballet performance, the audience sees dancers who look like graceful machines - ice princesses and princes if you will. In my film, the human strengths and foibles under that mask are revealed. Not one for talking at length about himself, Stevenson was unusually frank with me. I cut out all my questions and cues to get out of the way of his story, but also a story about his rapport and closeness with his many, many muses. Nothing on stage ever reveals this. Also conveying how much WORK ballet is, was critically important to me. One of my principal dancer friends told me that after a particularly demanding *Swan Lake*, some of her audience at the reception afterwards said to her: "Oh that was really sweet. By the way, what do you do for your day job?" So I added the dreamlike overlays of senior students practicing and practicing as Ben and his muses talk. Yes, it's repetitive, but that adds unspoken content about how difficult professional dance is, which maybe only dancers truly appreciate. I did not ever intend that it be a performance film. As dance aficionados would say, when they want to see a performance, they see a performance, they don't see a documentary film. So the purpose of my film, its content and its presentation style, is unique.

**RD:** How did your film on Stevenson happen?

**CS:** A chance meeting with Stevenson on the phone and a request for an interview got it started. Courtesy of several awards for film and television work, I was doing a Masters degree in Film on scholarship at the time. The film was not a school project, but something I wanted to do independently. I told him I was willing to take as long as it took, allowing for school work, working and everything else going on in my life.

When I first talked with him, he told me I was the first filmmaker to ask about doing a bio film on him. As well known as he is, too. I started some months later, when I'd got friends to loan me the equipment and edit systems I needed to finish the work. I talked to five of his main muses - he's got so many - who were as open as he was during interview sessions. Ben helped me arrange to shoot some B-roll footage in a class taught by one of his muses (who's now head of the school he directs in Fort Worth). That's what I used for the impressionistic overlays. The students were senior level but still all students. Now, two of them are apprentices in Ben's current company.

**RD:** Did you interview everyone you wanted?

**CS:** You could never meet everyone significant in Stevenson's ballet life in a year of Sundays. Besides so many of them are dead. Like Margot Fonteyn, Alicia Markova, Ninette de Valois, Anton Dolin, Kenneth MacMillan and on and on. He lived in such an interesting time in ballet history, when developing as a dancer and choreographer. Also he had people like Carlos Acosta and Li Cunxin (of "Mao's Last Dancer" fame) perform with the Houston ballet when he was there, but these guys and dozens of others now live in many different countries. I do think however, that I interviewed some of the people who are very important to him personally and professionally. He didn't say that, but when you hear them talk about him and listen to their anecdotes, you'll see what I mean. Besides, even with editing the material down considerably, the film is 2 hours and

11 minutes. I did not want it to run over that....

**RD:** So you don't miss having any real performance clips?

**CS:** Six of one, half a dozen of the other. Royalties and union fees could have forced me to seek major investors and then I might not have my first independent feature film. This film speaks particularly to people who are from the dance world, not just ballet. They understand the regimen of practice. So this is a niche film, for people and students in any part of the dance arts and their fan base. The good news is that the film has also appealed to many non-dance types, because it humanizes ballet dancers who they formerly saw as perfect and remote figures on a stage.

**RD:** How long did the project take?

**CS:** It was all "school and work permitting" as I didn't have a budget. I finished my Masters Degree before I began edit. Then I actually produced the DVD masters myself. Distribution studies weren't new to me, but distribution was. This is my first general release of a feature film, despite several hours of film & TV programming produced for DCTV and iMedia (city of Dallas till 2010) and some more for my degree. An online distributor was the simplest option. So what would take me about three to four months as a full time project took about three years from start to release.

**RD:** Does the film cover Stevenson's entire working life? Did you stop at the point your actual shooting stopped?

**CS:** Actually, I stopped earlier, because Stevenson is best known for his full length theater ballets. He had choreographed all those by the time he left the Houston ballet in 2003. His 27 years with Houston ballet and his formative years before that, in England, Europe and many different spots around the world, were to me, the most significant historically. Not to downplay his work since he moved from Houston to the DFW area, but as I said, this work was to feature a highly significant period in ballet's history through the eyes of one of its greatest living choreographers and convey that special rapport that exists between choreographers and their dancers, especially the ones on whom they choreograph new material. I certainly did that. Had I tackled time after 2003, I could have conveyed his thoughts on the polish and brilliance of recent performances and smaller "gem" creations, but that would have interfered with what I wanted to stand out in terms of dance: the full length theater ballets and their contribution to the dance world.

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**Robert Dupree** interviewer, is the director of the Blakley Library at the University of Dallas, where he has also been a professor for 47 years. He has also taught as a visiting professor in Europe and Asia and lectures on a variety of subjects, including literature, philosophy, art history, music history, and theater. His interest in film dates back to the late 1940s, when he first began developing his own negatives and prints and subsequently took up 16mm movie-making.

**Claire Soares** is a filmmaker, whose main documentary film subjects are dance & culture, technology and environmental sustainability. A Fellow of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers and author, she holds an MBA in International Business and an MA in Cinema & Television.