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FILM REVIEW

Healing Through Movement

By ANITA GATES

She was a young actress in New York in the late 1930's. Barely out of high school (back in Brookline, Mass.), she became a part of Manhattan's left-wing theater scene. She had a boyfriend and they lived together for a few months — even though it just wasn't done in those days — before marrying. Then just when she had been offered her first lead role in a play, her young husband accepted a job in Toledo, Ohio, and off they went. So much for fame and the arts, you might think.

But Norma Canner, today a lovely, sprightly white-haired woman of 80, found her creative calling anyway. Her story is told in "A Time to Dance: The Life and Work of Norma Canner," a 70-minute documentary from two young filmmakers, Ian Brownell and Webb Wilcoxon.

Ms. Canner's specialty is teaching dance — or more accurately, creative movement — as a form of psychotherapy. The method works for "preverbal traumatic states," says a psychiatric social worker, one of numerous talking heads called on to testify to Ms. Canner's abilities, which they do, mostly convincingly.

But Ms. Canner is her own best witness. "It will just come out, she says of the emotion. "You can't defend that place the way you can in verbal therapy." Later she adds,

"When people feel really safe enough to explore their feelings — feelings that have been held in their body for a very long time — they can go to very deep places."

That discovery was almost by accident. Ms. Canner had taken dance lessons from Barbara Mettler, an advocate of free expression. In Toledo, Ms. Canner decided to teach dance and began with children. When she started working with adults, a psychologist who was a student told her, "You're doing group therapy." She was soon invited to teach at a hospital. When the family moved back to Boston in 1966, her work expanded and today she has a thriving practice in Cambridge, Mass.

"A Time to Dance," narrated with conviction by Ruby Dee, seems to prove the superiority of nonverbal therapy by example. Old film of Ms. Canner's early work with preschoolers shows pure joy in the children's faces. The most fascinating encounter is hers with an autistic boy who defends himself by threatening people with words like annihilate and destroy. She breaks through, to his mother's amazement, by having him rip up colored tissue paper.

By comparison, scenes of Ms. Canner working with a therapy group of adults, with some movement but a good deal of talk, come across as painfully phony. More than one moviegoer will want to tell them to shut up and get back to movement, where the truth is.



Anthology Film Archive

Norma Canner, the subject of the documentary "A Time to Dance."

A TIME TO DANCE The Life and Work of Norma Canner

Produced, directed and edited by Ian Brownell and Webb Wilcoxon; director of photography, David Dawkins; music by Susan Robbins. At Anthology Film Archives, 32 Second Avenue, at Second Street, East Village. Running time: 70 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Norma Canner and Ruby Dee (Narrator).