

# THE BOSTON Phoenix

## state of the art

## Healing dance

Some 60 years ago, Norma Canner was a beautiful, promising young actress working with such artists as Elia Kazan and Clifford Odets. It was wartime: her husband enlisted. She turned down her first leading part on Broadway, had two children, and moved to Toledo. End of story? Not quite. After meeting Barbara Mettler, who pioneered the American creative-dance movement, Norma discovered her talent for teaching dance and went on to become a pioneer herself. Her field was expressive therapy, which utilizes drawing, music, theater, and dance in the context of other modes of therapy; it has proved extraordinarily beneficial for handicapped individuals, as well as providing cathartic healing experiences for those with deep emotional scars.

"I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I had stayed in New York and continued acting, but mostly I don't," Canner reflects in the film *A Time To Dance*, which will have its world premiere this Monday and

Tuesday at the Harvard Film Archive. This intimate, uncannily moving documentary (by filmmakers Ian Brownell and Webb Wilcoxon — both, believe it or not, in their early 20s) profiles a woman of extraordinary charisma who found in dance a way to help people who had been discarded by society. Canner's groundbreaking work with children who were blind, deaf, autistic, and mentally retarded (as it was still called in the 1950s) became a model for what was later called "early intervention."

For Canner, it was a natural transition from her method acting training and love of performance to helping children become more comfortable with their physical selves through drumming, movement, improvising sounds, and creating instruments out of found objects. After she taught in urban schools and day-care centers through the '70s, word spread of her unorthodox, innovative methods. She later taught for 13 years at Lesley College, where she helped found an Expressive Arts Therapy degree



program, and where she also took graduate courses in psychology.

Now 80, Canner has a private therapy practice in Cambridge. Many of her former clients, now therapists themselves, have become her collaborators. "Why not?" she says. "All human faults exist in therapists because they're human beings. If you've worked on your own problems, it makes you more empathetic and able to help others."

Some scenes in *A Time To Dance* are challenging to watch — in particular, group sessions where two of Canner's clients are

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experiencing acute anxiety and fear. Brownell and Wilcoxon showed this footage to the participants before including it in the final edited version. "Everyone involved essentially had the right to sign off on it," says Brownell. Wilcoxon adds, "The people participating were so wrapped up in working with Norma, they forgot all about the camera."

Not hard to believe. Wilcoxon is clearly enamored of the passionate, profound trajectory of Canner's life and work, especially her early career transitions. Both on screen and off, Canner exudes an uncommon aura — at once nurturing grandmother, village wise woman, inquisitive acolyte, and spiritual adept. Not bad for an ex-actress.

*A Time To Dance* screens December 7 and 8 at the Harvard Film Archive, 24 Quincy Street in Harvard Square. Norma Canner and Ian Brownell and Webb Wilcoxon will all be present at both screenings.

— Peg Aloï