

Time Out

New York

A Time to Dance: The Life and Work of Norma Canner

Dir. Ian Brownell and Webb Wilcoxon. 1998. N/R. 70mins. Documentary.

Ian Brownell and Webb Wilcoxon's *A Time to Dance* opens with a montage of all kinds of people skipping, wiggling, and shaking their booties—hippie types, business-folks, kids, old people, children with apparent disabilities. Among them is the radiant and vivacious Norma Canner, one of the pioneers of movement therapy, who at the age of 80 is still dancing with gusto and changing people's lives.

In the 1940s, Canner moved from Massachusetts to New York to pursue a career on the stage. When her husband was drafted, she chose to follow him rather than accept a lead on Broadway, and she later settled with him and their two children in Toledo. What

might have become a life of suburban drudgery was changed forever when a neighbor invited Canner to attend a class in creative movement taught by modern-dance innovator Barbara Mettler. Unlike a traditional dance teacher, Mettler asked her students to improvise, to seek the origin of movement within. While studying with Mettler, Canner realized that unlike acting (a skill, she believed, that people either did or did not have), dance is a medium for which every person has an innate and unique ability.

Canner is most famous for her work with developmentally disabled, blind and autistic children, and her efforts are dramatically documented in footage and stills that span more than three decades. Through simple movement and the playful use of rhythm instruments, Canner helps children learn to concentrate and to explore their environment and emotions without fear. In

some of the most moving clips in the film, Canner gently coaxes an autistic boy to examine his anger by giving him things that are safe to hit or destroy.

A few shots feature adults dancing in what seems a self-consciously New Age-y fashion, but by and large *Dance* is remarkably free from cloying, feel-good sentiment. Instead, the film is a portrait of an exceptional woman with a rare gift for compassion. Canner's ability to see the creative spirit in all people, even those on whom society has given up hope, is truly inspirational. (Opens Thu 19; Anthology.)

—Emily Barton

MOVER AND SHAKER Norma Canner heals through *Dance*.

