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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Photo: Addison Scurlock

Good Women Dancers Give Life

by Ellen Chenoweth

I'm gonna live till I die!
I'm gonna laugh 'stead of cry
I'm gonna take the town and turn it upside down
I'm gonna live, live, live until I die.

The documentary *Plenty of Good Women Dancers* opens with a scene of older African American women singing this upbeat Frank Sinatra tune in a rehearsal studio. In just the first 30 seconds of the film, we get a clear sense of the vivacity of these women from their colorful clothing choices and the gusto in their singing voices.

Before anything gets one-dimensional or easily-reducible, though, the song ends and we hear Germaine Ingram ask, “Can we just hear the piano? It sounds a little off-key to me.” This willingness to let the camera see the less-than-flawless moments is one of the great strengths of this compelling documentary.

Plenty of Good Women Dancers focuses on a 1995 performance at the Arts Bank at University of the Arts called *Steppin' in Time*. The film includes footage from the performance, footage from rehearsals and the lead-up to the show, and archival footage of the performers when they were younger. The project began as a collection of oral histories done by the Philadelphia Folklore Society, and then grew into a performance accompanied by a printed booklet with essays and biographical information, and then finally expanded to result in a documentary as well. Released in 2004, the documentary by Barry Dornfeld, Germaine Ingram, and Debora Kodish is available for free online at the Philadelphia Folklore Society website and is essential viewing for anyone interested in dance history or Philadelphia history.

The greatest gift of *Plenty of Good Women Dancers* is that the viewer gets to meet the dancers in question. There’s Edith “Baby”

Edwards Hunt, who started performing while still a child in clubs in Atlantic City and on the *Horn and Hardart Kiddie Hour* television show. We see a clip of her performing at Harlem nightspot Small's Paradise; she's in her early 60s, gleefully doing splits in an ensemble of gold-sequined vest, shorts, and hat. There's Hortense Allen Jordan, who served as Artistic Director for *Steppin' in Time*, drawing on her decades of experience as a producer. Jordan describes how sometimes, due to prejudice, lighter skinned dancers with less skill would end up in her line, saying, "She can't dance! Why are you going to break the veins in my legs to teach someone who don't know how to dance!" There's Libby Spencer, a clear-eyed observer who calls tap "the only original American dance form" and offers up recollections of her life as a chorus girl.

While most of the stars are African American women who careers were most active in the 1930s-50s, we also get to meet Philadelphia tapper LaVaughn Robinson. Often shown reminiscing in conversation with his dance partner, Germaine Ingram, Robinson's personality and wit leap off the screen.

The women memorably describe their lives in show business, shaped by the double discrimination of race and gender, with women sometimes not hired for fear they would "over-dance" their male partners. When they were hired as chorus girls, their schedules were demanding: Jordan describes a typical schedule as doing seven shows a night and performing in five numbers each show. A band leader pointed out that she was going on the floor 35 times each night, and she hadn't even realized it. "Nobody go on that hard, but that's what I was doing!"

One of the most interesting scenes takes us to a post-mortem meeting in which participants in *Steppin' in Time* share joys and concerns about the performance and its process. One woman talks about all the compliments people had received for their costumes ("We all looked good! I mean, we did!"), while a musician gently grumbles about the costs he incurred while crossing the New Jersey bridge to attend rehearsals. Another participant sums it up: "This was a rejuvenating kind of thing. It gave new life to all of us." You might find some new life yourself watching these dancers in action.

A great sense of camaraderie, both in the 1995 production and in the more distant past, animates the film, making it a delight. You revel in the joy the women take in performing, in their art, and in each other. These under-sung artists get a small piece of the recognition they deserve in *Plenty of Good Women Dancers*. The Philadelphia Folklore Project also deserves acknowledgement for creating this record and making it available to all.

Plenty of Good Women Dancers. Film by Barry Dornfeld, Germaine Ingram, Debora Kodish. Produced by Barry Dornfeld and Debora Kodish. Copyright: 2004, Philadelphia Folklore Project

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