**[360 Dance](http://www.thedancecurrent.com/columns/360-dance)** - The Dance Current

A Tangled Obsession

*By* [*Philip Szporer*](http://www.thedancecurrent.com/contributor/philip-szporer)



Making successful documentaries is getting more difficult in Canada and internationally. When it’s a dance documentary, the chance for success is even less. The recent Festival International des Films sur l’Art (FIFA) in Montréal gave dance filmmakers a moment to pause and contemplate how much this genre (a niche within a niche) is under threat. Representatives from major international broadcast outlets were unanimous in their lament that no one watches dance on television, and therefore without large viewership numbers, why should they invest? When public broadcasters rarely get into the game, just consider the challenge in approaching the private commercial networks.

In spite of these challenges, dance-film is not a hinterland, and work is still being made. Danielle Sturk is the intrepid independent filmmaker behind *A Good Madness – The Dance of Rachel Browne*. She is the writer, producer and director of the soon-to-be completed feature-length documentary. Audiences at this year’s Canada Dance Festival in Ottawa got a sneak preview and, after some final edits, the film will hit the festival circuit this fall. Sturk secured the production through funds from the Canada Council For The Arts, Manitoba Arts Council, Manitoba Film & Music, MTS (Stories from Home) and Winnipeg Film Group.

Though Browne is considered an icon in Canadian dance circles, and founded Winnipeg’s Contemporary Dancers (WCD) – the country’s oldest professional modern dance company – in 1964, it’s a bit of a surprise that the Philadelphia-born dancemaker’s life and work has never been the subject of a documentary. “Her presence was always there [in Winnipeg],” and yet, as Sturk tells it, Browne remains in many ways a mystery.

Before becoming a filmmaker, Sturk had a full career as a dance artist (1986-1997), including a stint as artistic director of the Montréal-based company Graffiti Tango. She had danced briefly with WCD before moving elsewhere to pursue her career. But upon returning to Winnipeg after some years away, she realized that people weren’t paying much attention to Browne’s legacy. Browne’s death in 2012, at age seventy-seven, was a wake-up call and a call to action.

In the documentary, Sturk wanted to uncover Rachel Browne the person, about whom Sturk was quite curious, and to tell that story rather than the story of her dance work. For those hungry for dance, Sturk promises that there’s plenty of Browne’s signature essential, unmannered movement on view in the documentary. She films the dance sequences with a cinematic eye, taking them into unusual places, like a lake, a forest and a railway station’s concourse. She also works with old handheld video footage and includes early photos of Browne, who apparently did not like to be “captured.”

Browne’s life seems to have been driven by dance. She moved to New York City as a teenager, with encouragement from English ballet dancer and choreographer Antony Tudor, to study with teachers who were engaging in a contemporary way of teaching ballet. There she trained intensively with American choreographer Benjamin Harkarvy who became a major influence in her own understanding of pedagogy. A season after he moved north to become artistic director of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet (RWB), in 1957, he invited Browne to join him, and she followed. The RWB became her home, and she danced through the ranks and became a soloist. Here was a dance pioneer and a woman with a family in the 1960s, a time when it was extremely hard to do both. Her story is not a tidy narrative. Browne had a fanatical “without dance, I die” mentality, and even though she left the ballet four years later, at twenty-six, to become a homemaker, staying at home permanently with her children was not necessarily in the cards. Browne’s complex fanaticism, and her desire “not to miss out on what I love,” was in her own words, “a form of madness.” Her obstinate, tenacious personality is revealed in the film, often through Browne’s own voice. Sturk had access to nearly seven hours of remarkable audio recordings of interviews with Browne, excerpts of which figure prominently in the documentary. “She was refreshingly radical, verbally,” the filmmaker says. The challenge for Sturk was to weave together Browne’s personal reflections with the recollections of others. She organized shoots with family members and several artists Browne mentored, but Sturk was not interested in creating a heroic portrait, or “doing a Hallmark card.”

During her initial research, she felt that people were quite guarded about Browne, that they were “keeping her secrets,” Sturk says. Sexuality and feminism loomed large, and Sturk found herself dancing around nuanced politics. In the end, she’s sanguine, saying, “All I can do is present my personal interpretation of what I’ve been exposed to over the past couple of years.”

Sturk insists what she’s created is not a biography, or a chronological approach to documentary.  What’s on view, she suggests, is the synthesis and insight drawn from raw footage and disparate interviews and, having shaped them into a creative work about an unorthodox, enigmatic woman, hopes that, as any filmmaker hopes, it will stand the test of time.

*Posted July 10, 2014*