

Dance film: experimental shorts



Script for *Hands*, 1995, Adam Roberts

A look at the work of filmmaker Adam Roberts who has made dance films with the acclaimed Jonathan Burrows Group and prima ballerina Sylvie Guillem. Interviews by **Cleo Williams**

Adam Roberts has made five dance films over the past seven years, all with choreographer Jonathan Burrows. Two of the films, *Our Film* and *The Stop Quartet* inhabit a theatrical space rather more so than a filmic space and lean more towards stage adaptations than fitting so comfortably into a dance film mold. The three most interesting works from the five, in a dance film sense, are *Hands*, *blue yellow* and *Very*. The success of these films is derived from their apparent simplicity and subtlety, which is countered by their depth of layers of artistry and intention.

Adam had been a film editor and worked on soundtracks, so when he came to direct films himself he wanted to explore the visual vocabulary of techniques; cutting, framing, selection of what you look at, what you choose not to look at, and how you see things. He had already made some narrative films and a recurring problem for him was the extent to which narrative film hangs on dialogue, however emphatic the visual play. It was then a natural step which took Roberts into the

world of dance film, dance having its emphasis on communication through movement and the body. Roberts's approach is particularly well suited to the dance film form. He works with similar sensibilities to dance with this intention to communicate in his work through what is done rather than what is said. In *Very* and *blue yellow* for example, a presence is strongly felt by the viewer in his use of the camera as active observer and this in itself paints the atmosphere and gives another layer of narrative to the films in terms of his relationship to the dance and performer. Even in the films that involve restaging pre-existing stage dance pieces for camera, Roberts does so much more than simply translate dance into film terms. He adds his own layers of meaning and design to create something that is beyond the realms of either dance or film. "Dance films need to exist neither as dance nor as film, they're somewhere in between. A new space, what's good is always in between" Adam's view is that there are two ways dance film making can be approached: "Here's a piece of dance and I'm going to film it and what are the solutions

to filming it' or 'This is a film and this is the material that I'm integrating into the filming'. I'm very practical about it: here's the camera."

The first of the five films Adam Roberts and Jonathan Burrows made together was *Very* (16mm b&w), in 1993. Roberts showed an interest in filming a rehearsal while the stage piece was being choreographed and developed in the studio. They both liked the result and it was re-shot and edited into a 13 minute film. The technique he used in *Very*, shooting between two panels that often obscure the action, and in *blue yellow* shooting from outside the room with the door framing the space, also affect the way the viewer perceives the dance. For Jonathan Burrows it was a revelation to work with someone who seemed to understand the spatial concerns of the choreographer: "Without discussion Adam had an idea which I saw retained the integrity of the dance makers space in a completely different way. In *Very* he did it by placing two boards with a very narrow gap and shot the film through this

narrow gap. The imagination filled in everything that you couldn't see and so where the dancers went became important again. I thought that was really exciting. And every subsequent film we've made Adam has approached the idea of retaining the integrity of the dance makers space in a different way." For Roberts it is also about his dislike of the limitations of the screen frame that leads him often to change the ratio of the frame, thereby giving variety to the visual world of the screen.

Currently one of the main platforms sought by many dance filmmakers is the *Dance for the Camera* series of programmes commissioned jointly by BBC 2 and the Arts Council of England. An annual commission of up to ten short dance films is open to application by a director and choreographer team. Roberts feels this arena needs to be opened up; "One thing that needs to be done is to get away from the quite high budget show pieces." Referencing *Dance for the Camera*: "Everyone spends all year writing their bloody proposal and it's an emphasis on slickness and production values that really I think is to be regretted. I find defining the duration of the programme very worrying, I actually would welcome a recommitment from Channel 4 or BBC to scheduling one and a half hours of dance film on a regular basis and to include low budget experimental work." Roberts believes dance film makers should begin to look elsewhere, "I think low budget is where it could probably really come to life. I really think Super 8 is the key but then you've got the problem of where do you show it."

Hands (35mm, b&w) was made in 1995 as part of the *Dance for the Camera* series. *Hands* is a concept piece made specifically for the camera. A precise score was written for a pair of hands and the original intention was for a musician to "play" the score, although it was actually performed by Jonathan Burrows. He ornamented the score for the hands above and beyond the specific notation adding flourishes to the movement, which Roberts concedes to because he feels it is a good film and has been successful with the embellishment.



Frames from *Hands*, 1995, Adam Roberts



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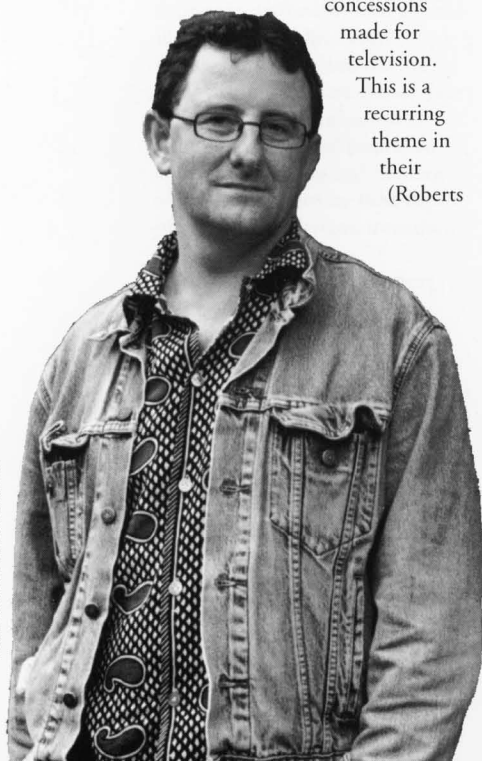
The film begins as the camera moves in to a medium close up of a pair of hands resting on the lap of a man seated. There is little other camera movement for the duration of this five minute film. Adam Roberts had worked on a drama in which a piece of dialogue was filmed just with a close up on the speakers' hands. Roberts felt that it had been unsuccessful and appeared contrived, so making *Hands* gave him another chance to explore this idea. "While Jonathan was excited by the beauty of hands and their particular movement possibilities, I had been interested in the expressive possibilities of parts other than the human face that dominates film framings."

Roberts holds those he collaborates with in high regard and celebrates the strength of their contribution. His collaborators are his friends and Roberts sees their time together more than just working on a film; but a stimulating relationship in itself, sharing ideas and views. This is perhaps why their working relationship is such a success as by its very nature it leads to making choices that instinctually work with each others'. His collaborators are all well respected in each of their chosen fields: "I was lucky to choose to work with one of the best choreographers in the UK":

choreographer Jonathan Burrows. Some of Adams' other collaborators on these dance films have been musician/composer Kevin Volans and musician/composer Matteo Fargion, lighting camera man Jack Hazan (director of *A Bigger Splash*), and sound mixer Hugh Strain (*The Caretaker* and experimental films of the 1960s). To this group of artists, collaboration is not about compromise but rather "The point of collaboration is the point at which you choose the right person to work with. After that you just let them do their work." Kevin Volans (quoted by Burrows in interview with the author). Jonathan Burrows corroborates this approach: "It's hard enough for me doing my work without thinking about doing someone else's work as well." Roberts tends to agree and says of his crew: "They don't just do what they're told to do and if they did it would be less. Everyone's got their own process. You can't control everything and who would want to anyway."

blue yellow (16mm) is one of the pieces they have made specifically for film without it existing first as a stage piece. Sylvie Guillem, one of France's most celebrated prima ballerinas, approached Jonathan Burrows to make a film with her with a view to securing a broadcast slot on French and British terrestrial television. What is interesting, is that the pace of the resulting 14 minute film is uncompromisingly

slow; there are no concessions made for television. This is a recurring theme in their (Roberts



Adam Roberts. Photo David Collins



Jonathan Burrows

and Burrows) work together: an unequivocal sense of commitment to the idea and the work without compromise, an explicit integrity that is overtly present.

As in *Very* the view is restricted as the camera remains for the most part, outside the room in which the dance/action takes place. Sylvie Guillem has a quite fantastic facility and range of movement, and yet this was not exploited by the choreography for *blue yellow*, rather it was almost as if she was bound by the choreography to remain grounded and inwardly focused, elements so at odds with the emphasis on lightness and on defying gravity of her ballet background. Similarly, Adam Roberts did not want to capitalise on her training in his treatment of the dance with his medium of film. Roberts had seen the material a lot in rehearsal. "She was so magnetic... but I didn't want to make the kind of dance film I dislike where a commodity is made out of technique, training and beauty. One thought was that this person is extraordinary and what she does is extraordinary and that seems so distancing. It seems so difficult in a way to become unaware of what she does. In a sense that is the narrative; a chronicle of just how separate I actually felt from the essence of what she was doing." Roberts had done a picture edit without sound. Composer Kevin Volans came to the cutting room with a movement of a string quartet that he wanted to use. "We started cutting up the music exactly as we'd done

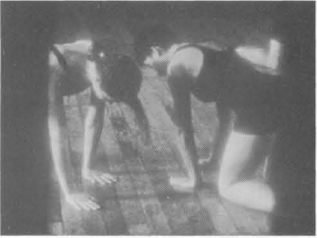
with *Very* and placing it through the film. We placed the music, spacing it out and luckily the way it fell did something very good. It emphasised a sense that, as the close up happened, the music seemed to be as in love with her as the 'eye' was."

Adam talks very much as an outsider to dance and I think this comes through in his films *Very* and *blue yellow*; he/the camera stays for the most part, outside the dance space looking in. I think this is what is so appealing about these films and makes them so effective. The camera's view in these two films is quite anthropomorphic, like a curious observer, looking some of the time, trying to understand what is going on, then getting distracted and looking elsewhere, losing interest, then returning once more to concentrated study of the spectacle. At certain points in *Very* and *blue yellow* the screen goes to black before coming back to the dance, something which Burrows termed "visual silences". This effect again gives a sense of the watcher having a finite attention span or literally blinking, which again humanises the camera and it is this character of the camera that helps to bring these films alive as dance films.

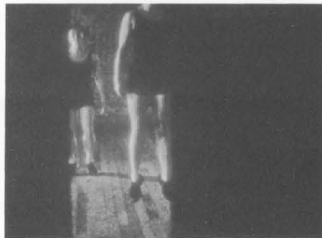
Adam Roberts makes the film as he sees the work: as an outsider to the dance – bringing a new meaning to the term Outsider Art! "I feel they are unusual, experimental films and those don't necessarily have instant appeal – they've never won any prizes, although they always show them at the festivals, but they've not been repeated on television."

Roberts is currently working on a feature film and feels it requires a very different mind set to work on drama than abstract non-narrative work, and he admits he cannot do both simultaneously. He is sad that they have not made another dance

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film recently but Roberts does not feel drawn to a particular idea he wants to pursue at the moment in dance film. Adam Roberts's honesty and integrity is what struck me on both meeting him and seeing his work. He won't make another dance film until he feels a real compulsion, until he has something to say.

The challenge Roberts originally set for himself was to make films that arrest attention without dialogue: "How articulate a film without dialogue can be is the question. This is not the same as silent film, because silent film is narrative and relies on intertitles. What I was particularly interested in was the question; is there a kind of expressiveness that you can present on film that avoids these overt language-based things." In these three films *Hands*, *blue yellow* and *Very* the answer is a resounding; yes, you can. Roberts has succeeded in making redundant

these "language-based things" he wanted to relinquish. And in doing so has paved the way for others to further explore this "space in between" that good inventive dance film inhabits.

Cleo Williams

**Dance Film Forum
18 Nov, 9 Dec, 13 Jan
at Chisenhale Dance Space**

Screening + artist led discussion for dance film makers and audiences and anyone interested in feeding into the growth of a dance film culture.
Contact Chisenhale on 020 8981 6617 to submit films and/or with ideas for discussion.

**Dance on Screen 2000
Monday 30 October
Sunday 5 November 2000
See programme on page 5.**

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