

BELLA

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Best Documentary Feature



"... a riveting documentary."
Film Week, KPCC



PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY BRIDGET MURNANE

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(All Photos Courtesy of [The Lewitzky Dance Company Archive, USC](#))

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BELLA**SHORT SYNOPSIS**

Bella Lewitzky, Dance Theater 1949

The film, *BELLA*, is about the life, influence and impact of California-based artist and activist Bella Lewitzky. Described as "...one of the greatest American dancers of our age," (Walter Terry). Bella Lewitzky was a talented, strong, out-spoken individual, who dedicated her creative life to protect the rights of every American. Designated one of America's Irreplaceable Dance Treasures by the Dance Heritage Coalition and awarded the National Medal of Arts, Lewitzky's life demonstrates how a "uniquely Californian" artist with vision and tenacity can change the lives of her fellow citizens.

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MEDIUM SYNOPSIS



Bella Lewitzky, Bella Lewitzky Dance Company, 1966

This is the story of a strong, talented, outspoken artist, who gave her creative life to protect the rights of every American citizen. Born while her parents were members of the socialist Llano Del Rio Colony in 1916, raised on a chicken farm in Highland, Lewitzky became the star of the Lester Horton Dance Group, the first American inter-racial dance company. Based in Los Angeles in the 1930s and 40s she was the primary developer of the Horton technique. Her students included Alvin Ailey and Carmen De Lavallade who went on to form the Alvin Ailey company in New York. The Horton technique is taught world-wide, and unlike modern techniques developed in the eastern United States, is based on Native American dance. In Lewitzky, Horton found the body upon which he would build his technique, a uniquely west coast modern dance. Lewitzky's move to the Los Angeles in 1930 from San Bernadino with her family exposed her to a new kind of intensity. She lived in a diverse, working-class neighborhood at the height of the depression. As the lead dancer of the Horton Company, Lewitzky starred in his productions of "Salome" and "Rite of Spring" at the Hollywood Bowl in 1937 to rave reviews. Her work in "Tierray libertad," a comment on the Spanish conquest of Mexico, and

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"Departure From The Land," an evocation of Dust Bowl emigration, drew cheers at the end of each performance. Social injustice, anti-fascism, American and Mexican history were some of the themes of Horton's dances embodied by dancers committed to these themes in their daily lives. They did not shrink from such topics as police brutality toward Mexican-Americans in such works as "The Park." Being a modern dancer in Los Angeles at this time did not provide a sustainable income. To support herself and her family Lewitzky worked under the Federal Theatre Project in works choreographed by Horton and others. She also assisted Horton on film projects as well as Hanya Holm and Agnes DeMille. In 1950 Lewitzky and Horton parted ways. Lewitzky felt a need to develop her own choreographies and ultimately opened a small studio, Dance Associates, on the other side of Hollywood. She recalls, "... one day a gentleman with a hat on... handed me a subpoena." She was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee where she pleaded the Fifth Amendment. Her life took a drastic turn following these events. She later stated, "It really is frightening when you can realize that your safety and right to life can be removed from you and that your enemy is never seen, is hidden, and that your accusers cannot be confronted because you don't know who they are." (Lewitzky's FBI file was recently released, albeit blacked out excessively.) Film work was impossible for her. The only person who would hire her was Agnes DeMille, choreographer for the film adaptation of *Oklahoma*. Lewitzky recalls, "... Her usual assistants were not available to her, and she asked if I would be interested in doing it. I pointed out to her that I was at that point quite publicly blacklisted. Agnes had courage. She said, 'It's all right.'" Although she was the rehearsal director, assisted DeMille in re-choreographing scenes, and danced in some scenes, the studio stipulated that she would not receive credit for her work. Lewitzky did not work professionally for ten years, although she continued to choreograph and teach on her own. In 1966 she founded the Bella Lewitzky Dance Company. Unlike her earlier works, which were dramatic and socially conscious, her new choreography emphasized pure movement, and her dancers became noted for their strength, line, elevation, and agility—a tribute to her gifts as a teacher. She also became the founding dean of the School of Dance at the California Institute of the Arts where she developed a multicultural/inter-arts approach to teaching modern dance. She worked tirelessly to promote dance in California and sat on many national panels and boards. In 1990 Lewitzky refused to sign an anti-obscenity clause on the acceptance form of a \$72,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant. Unable to meet their payroll, her company disbanded as she joined with People for the American Way to sue the NEA. Calling a press conference at the Roosevelt Hotel in Hollywood, site of the 1950's HUAC hearings, she stated, "Please watch out. This is a pattern with which I am very familiar and it has nothing to do with pornography. Pornography is simply the demagogic weapon that permitted mind rule and censorship to move forward." Lewitzky prevailed in this landmark case and was finally awarded the grant. The NEA was instructed to "take into consideration general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public." This process took time away from Lewitzky's choreography and fund raising. After a re-organization she decided to close her company with a final international tour and gala. On May 17, 1997 at the Luckman Theatre at Cal State LA, the campus where her company gave its first performance, she said good-bye to her audience and stated, "The arts are under threat more than ever before. What legacy I have left here will die unless you become responsible for keeping it alive." At age 88, her physical health had deteriorated but her vital spirit continued to inspire those around her. Designated one of *America's Irreplaceable Dance Treasures* by the Dance Heritage Coalition and awarded the National Medal of Arts by President Clinton, Lewitzky's life demonstrates how an artist with vision and tenacity changed the lives of her fellow citizens for the better. Bella Lewitzky died on July 16, 2004.

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Long Synopsis



Bella Lewitzky, California Institute of the Arts, 1972

Born while her parents were members of the socialist Llano Del Rio Colony in the Mojave Desert, raised on a chicken farm in Highland CA, Lewitzky became the star of the Lester Horton Dance Group based in Los Angeles, the first American inter-racial dance company. Based in Los Angeles in the 1930's and 40's Lewitzky was the primary developer of the Horton technique. Her students included Alvin Ailey and Carmen de Lavallade who went on to form the Alvin Ailey Dance Company in New York City. The Horton technique is taught world-wide, and unlike modern techniques developed in the eastern United States, is based on Native American dance. In Lewitzky, Horton found the body upon which he would build his technique, a uniquely west coast modern dance, historically under-represented in the lexicon of dance and cultural history. Social injustice, anti-fascism, American and Mexican history were some of the themes of Horton's dances embodied by dancers committed to these themes in their daily lives. Living in a multicultural neighborhood in Echo Park, Los Angeles, during the depression, Lewitzky was very much an artist/citizen of her time, committed to her art, community, family and society as a whole. Being a modern dancer in Los Angeles at this time did not provide a sustainable income. To support herself and her family Lewitzky worked under the Federal Theatre Project in works choreographed by Horton and others. She also assisted Horton on film projects as well as Hanya Holm and Agnes DeMille. The support of this program was essential to the well-being and development of many artists during the "New Deal." The effect of the program was enormous as it kept hundreds of artists employed.

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In Los Angeles, many moved into the “Hollywood” system, as did Bella, often performing as a background dancer, featured dancer or dance assistant. Although the history of the “Hollywood Entertainment Industry” has been well documented, those artists in the background who moved between mainstream entertainment and art have not been addressed. These films, often full of racial, class and sexist stereotypes, featured Lewitzky as the “exotic” one, e.g., credited as a “specialty dancer” in *White Savage* where she danced on a large drum as a “native.” Although the veneer of these films was white, privileged and male, the reality of who made the work often differed when it came to the lower echelons of the credits or “uncredited” crew. There were many historical intersections between the mainstream and artistic communities in Los Angeles at this time.

In 1950 Lewitzky and Horton parted ways. Lewitzky felt a need to develop her own choreographies and ultimately opened a small studio, Dance Associates, on the other side of Hollywood. She recalls, “... one day a gentleman with a hat on... handed me a subpoena.” She was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee where she pleaded the Fifth Amendment. Her life took a drastic turn following these events. While most Americans are familiar with HUAC and the famous producers, directors, writers and “The Hollywood Ten,” who were called before it, many are unaware of those like Lewitzky who were not famous and had no power base within the industry. Some have inferred that she was named due to her support of the integration of dance/ballet schools. Although she was called before the committee only once, refusing to testify against fellow artists, every time the committee came back to Los Angeles for hearings, her case and picture were prominently featured in the media, stating in the Los Angeles Times, “I am not a singer, I am a dancer.” She could not “safely” work in films, colleagues would cross the street to avoid her, she received threatening phone calls, friends had rocks thrown through their windows. The only person who would hire her at this time was Agnes DeMille who brought Lewitzky on as her assistant on the movie “Oklahoma,” with the stipulation that Lewitzky would not receive credit. She later stated, “It really is frightening when you can realize that your safety and right to life can be removed from you and that your enemy is never seen, is hidden, and that your accusers cannot be confronted because you don’t know who they are.” When Lewitzky’s biographer applied for her FBI file, she was told it had disappeared. After two congressional investigations by Congressman Adam Schiff, we now have a 90 page version of the 500 page file.

In 1966 Lewitzky founded the Bella Lewitzky Dance Company. Unlike her earlier works, which were dramatic and socially conscious, her new choreography emphasized pure movement, and her dancers became noted for their strength, line, elevation, and agility—a tribute to her gifts as a teacher. She also became the founding dean of the School of Dance at the California Institute of the Arts where she developed a multicultural/inter-arts approach to teaching modern dance. She worked tirelessly to promote dance in California and sat on many national panels and boards.

In 1990 Lewitzky refused to sign an anti-obscenity clause on the acceptance form of a \$72,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant. A clear intersection of art and politics Lewitzky stated, “Please watch out. This is a pattern with which I am very familiar and it has nothing to do with pornography. Pornography is simply the demagogic weapon that permitted mind rule and censorship to move forward.” Unable to meet their payroll, her company disbanded as she joined with People for the American Way to sue the NEA director John Frohnmayer. Lewitzky prevailed in this landmark case and was finally awarded the grant. The NEA was instructed to “take into consideration general

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standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public." This process took time away from Lewitzky's choreography and fund raising. After a re-organization she decided to close her company with a final international tour and gala. On May 17, 1997 at the Luckman Theatre at Cal State LA, the campus where her company gave its first performance, she said good-bye to her audience and stated, "The arts are under threat more than ever before. What legacy I have left here will die unless you become responsible for keeping it alive." This case and the actions of the NEA changed the funding structure for the arts in the United States. Individual grants are no longer given to artists, but must be supported by institutions.. At age 88, her physical health had deteriorated but her vital spirit continued to inspire those around her. Lewitzky's life demonstrates how a "uniquely Californian" artist with vision and tenacity can change the lives and landscapes of her fellow citizens for the better. Bella Lewitzky died on July 16, 2004.



Bella Lewitzky, House American Activities Committee Hearing, 1951



Bella Lewitzky Awarded the National Medal of the Arts by President and Mrs. Clinton

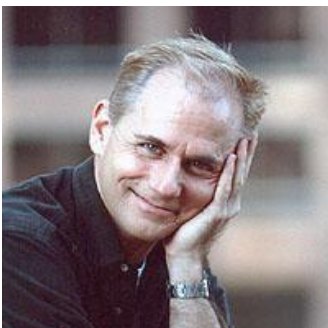
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About the Filmmakers



Producer/Director Bridget Murnane has exhibited her work in theatrical, broadcast and cable platforms. She received an MA in Dance and an MFA in Television and Film Production from UCLA, and is a former Professor of Television, Film and Media Studies at California State University, Los Angeles. Bridget produced the feature *Odile and Yvette at the Edge of the World*, premiering at the Edinburgh Film Festival, and receiving theatrical distribution. She was awarded a Pew Fellowship and selected to be a Faculty Fellow by the Television Academy. In 2019 Bridget received a grant from the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences to design and implement the course "Women Making Films" in collaboration with Canon Burbank. Bridget's recent film, *BELLA*, received 17 awards, exhibited in over 50 festivals, qualified for Oscar consideration in the Best Feature Documentary category, and broadcast on the World Channel, and PBS SoCal. *BELLA* had a Los Angeles theatrical release in Fall 2023.

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Walter Kennedy, Associate Producer, was a principal dancer with the Lewitzky Dance Company for nearly twenty years. He was trained by Bella Lewitzky to be one of her master teachers of technique, improvisation, and composition, and was appointed the company's rehearsal director from 1990 - 1997. He has also worked with such diverse choreographers as Lar Lubovitch, Laura Dean, Joe Goode and Anna Sokolow.



Alex Bushe, Co-Writer, Editor, is a Los Angeles-based editor with experience in both fiction and nonfiction filmmaking. He has worked on over 20 films, including 6 features with renowned director Werner Herzog. Other works include Lynne Ramsay's "You Were Never Really Here," Andrea Arnold's "American Honey", and Nick Broomfield's "Tales of the Grim Sleeper."



Pat Verducci, Co-Writer, has worked with both New York Times best-selling authors, and newbies who are working on their first book or screenplay. As a writer she's penned scripts for Touchstone Pictures, Witt Thomas Productions, and Disney's animation division. She co-produced the award-winning documentary "Somewhere Between." Pat serves as a mentor at the Meryl Streep/Oprah Winfrey IRIS Writer's Lab for Women



Morgan Sandler, Cinematographer, has spent nearly 17 years shooting feature films, television shows, commercials and music videos. Before joining La Verne University in 2016, Morgan was a professor at Cal State Los Angeles where he designed the digital cinematography program. He is the author of "Visual Storytelling: How to Speak to the Audience Without Saying a Word"

