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Dances Made to Order, to Chicago: "Action!"

Choreographers who prefer cameras to stages have a new theater. *By Zachary Whittenburg*

Published: April 26, 2012



Rachel Damon, left, and Julia Rae Antonick in *Nothing to See/Hear* (2011), a film by Nadia Oussenko

Photo: Nadia Oussenko

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Dancer-filmmaker Nadia Oussenko

Photo: Daniel Kullman

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Filmmaker Kingsley Irons, 34, takes my call while scouting locations for an upcoming shoot. Her body is in the Sepulveda Basin, 15 miles northwest of the Hollywood Sign. Her mind is in 11 places, only one of which is Los Angeles; another is Chicago, the city of the month beginning Tuesday 1 for [Dances Made to Order](#), the online film festival she cofounded with Bryan Koch last spring.

Each month from January through November, three new five-minute dance videos are made in a different city and then posted online. (April featured Atlanta; June will focus on Boston.) Unlimited access to each set costs \$10; a subscription to the entire season—33 films, plus bonus material—costs \$50. The artists, chosen by local partners, have two weeks to make their shorts based on three themes elected

Nadia Oussenko, 35, says she's honored to be invited but nervous about the schedule. "A two-minute piece would be fine. But five minutes in two weeks? Scary. I'm a meticulous editor, and that takes time—it's not just about getting the right shot. But I'm definitely up for the challenge. I need to get my ass whooped, and this is a good opportunity to think on my feet." (Oussenko's five-minute film *Nothing to See/Hear* took ten weeks to complete last fall.)

Irons admits Oussenko faces a tight turnaround, but "I wouldn't put an artist through a process that I couldn't do myself," she says. "As an artist, there are three things I need:

inspiration, a deadline and a kick in the ass to get it done."

Exposure and revenue don't hurt, either. As DMTO moves to each new location, Irons says the series picks up a host of new season subscribers. She's happy to tell me that the \$10 option hasn't been popular.

Twenty-five percent of the revenue keeps the site afloat; each city's curatorial partner receives 10 percent of the take. Irons and Koch pay the remaining 65 percent to the artists. "The dance world is not thinking about [money] the way that it should," Irons says.

Oussenko and fellow Chicagoans Kaitlin Fox and Atalee Judy were selected by a three-person committee from Columbia College Chicago's dance and film departments. Irons chose Columbia because its Dance Center "makes progressive decisions," she says, reflected in its "curatorial scope [and] the quality of artists they produce."

Dance department chair Onye Ozuzu, 41, hopes proximity to DMTO will "expose our students to new ideas about how they might imagine themselves as dancers."

Citing a still-warm debate over whether Beyoncé's "Countdown" video plagiarized or honored choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, Ozuzu observes that online video has been a game changer for choreographers. "And when the game changes," she adds, "it's important to reevaluate all the rules. There are kids gathered around screens in Indonesia and South Africa learning dances from all over the planet, in ways unimaginable a decade ago. It's important for dance to jump into this arena."

Of the possibility of taking DMTO abroad, Irons says, "Yeah, people have asked me, 'What about Europe?' Europe's cool but there are lots of great artists working in the U.S. who deserve attention. There are dedicated dance and dance-film communities in [March partner] Salt Lake City, for example. We want to draw attention to action where you might not expect it."

Watch *Dances Made to Order in Chicago* and catch up with its first season (\$40) at dancesmadetoorder.com.

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Bryan Koch 147 days ago

When Kingsley and I started *Dances Made to Order* last April, I wasn't sure if artists would be able to consistently tackle our two-week challenge...especially since audience members--not the artists--select the inspiration for the films. A year and over 30 films later, my expectations have been blown out of the water. Every month, we get festival-worthy work. In fact, DMTO dance films have been accepted to eight festivals so far!

We're pursuing our passion, and appreciate all the support we've received.

Thank you for this piece Zachary. Couldn't have explained *Dances Made to Order* better myself!

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