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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

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Imagine, if you will, that there's a large room where we keep all the fabulous people. These fabulous people have anecdotes, none of which you have heard. They also have great clothes, amazing jewelry, joie de vivre coming out their ears and just enough ego to make them believe that what they have to say is worth hearing.

You'd visit that room, yes? Maybe only once a week, because it might get overwhelming, but you'd keep coming back. It'd be like the Personality Genome Project. (Which reminds me, extremely tangentially: www.pandora.com; have fun.)

So here's the thing: There's a

a documentary movie called Ballets Russes that appears to have been entirely filmed in the room of fabulous people. That's not the only reason you should see it -- and you really should see it -- but it's one of them.

Here's another reason:

This movie is a miracle of narrative exposition.

Filmmakers Dan Geller and Dayna Goldfine, along with their editor Gary Weimberg, have a

very complicated story to tell, and yet the story is not the point of the movie, so they have to both tell the story and get out of its way.

It's like a graduate course in documentary film editing.

(Documentarians have a great problem: They are constrained by the facts. It might be easier or funnier or more moving if it happened in one way, but, sadly, no. It happened another way, in an asymmetrical, messy, inexplicable way, and that's the story that has to be told. I encounter this problem in my own work, and I hate it. Damn those facts!)

The story, briefly and way oversimplified: The Russian dance entrepreneur Sergei Diaghilev started a revolutionary company called Ballets Russes. After his death, two competing companies -- the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the Original Ballet Russe -- toured the world for the next several decades. As might be expected, the leaders of the respective troupes were enemies. There was intrigue, dancer theft, mad affairs, persistent poverty and equally persistent acclaim. But the two companies were both working from the same tradition, a redefinition of classical dance, and together they brought dance back to a wide audience.

And here's an unexpected consequence of advances in medical science: A lot of the dancers in both companies are still alive. Some of them are still teaching; a few are even still performing, including Mark Platt, who is shown onstage with the Marin Theatre Company. (Mark Platt was also one of the principal dancers in "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" - - yow.) The oldest of them were raised in France because their young parents had to leave Russia because of the Revolution. Here's a big shout-out to Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, unwitting patron of the arts.

So, now, is there anyone more fabulous than a Russian ballerina, particularly a Russian ballerina willing to tell stories? As it happens: no. That's why the film spends so much time in the room of fabulous people. There are many, many "moments" in the film, partly because these folks are no dummies and know how to create crowd-pleasing moments, even though (or especially because) they're mostly in their 80s.

But wait, there's more: Amazing archival footage, most of it shot by amateurs using wind-up 16mm cameras. The quality of the film is not wonderful, but the quality of the dance is astonishing. Even the bad dances -- and there's some pretty over-the-top stuff, and not in a good way -- are exhilarating in their ambition. If some of the numbers seemed to be based on the "throw it against the wall and see what sticks" school of aesthetics, that is always to be preferred to the "let's not

throw anything against the wall and hope no one notices" school of polite, cautious performance.

Plus: Matisse did sets and costumes; Dali did sets and costumes; Balanchine choreographed until he was kicked out; Hollywood kicked in, with mixed results; there were many train rides. The whole enterprise, both enterprises, were deliciously improbable.

There is also melancholy, as there always is in the room of fabulous people. Some of most vivacious dancers in the movie died before the film was finished. Others are too sick to make it to a movie theater. This is a snapshot of an era just before all human reminders of the era leave the stage forever. So there's that sadness, all the more powerful for being unspoken.

"Ballets Russes" will be at the Balboa and Albany through the 22nd, and will start a week at the Opera Plaza on Friday. Maybe the Power of the Column will get the runs extended even further. Or, you know, not. But really, go see it. Money-back guarantee.

And when I say "money-back guarantee," I do not mean that I personally will give you your money back. It's just a figure of speech. Or it's just another example of the unreliable liberal media. Let's dance!

O body swayed to music, o brightening glance; how can we know the dancer from jcarroll@sfgchronicle.com.