

Arts

Their father had been a ballet dancer — and for 45 years, no one knew

Jamie Ross' award-winning Hot Docs film *Dad Can Dance* delves into family secrets

[Saelan Twerdy](#) · CBC Arts · Posted: May 12, 2022 3:32 PM ET | Last Updated: May 12



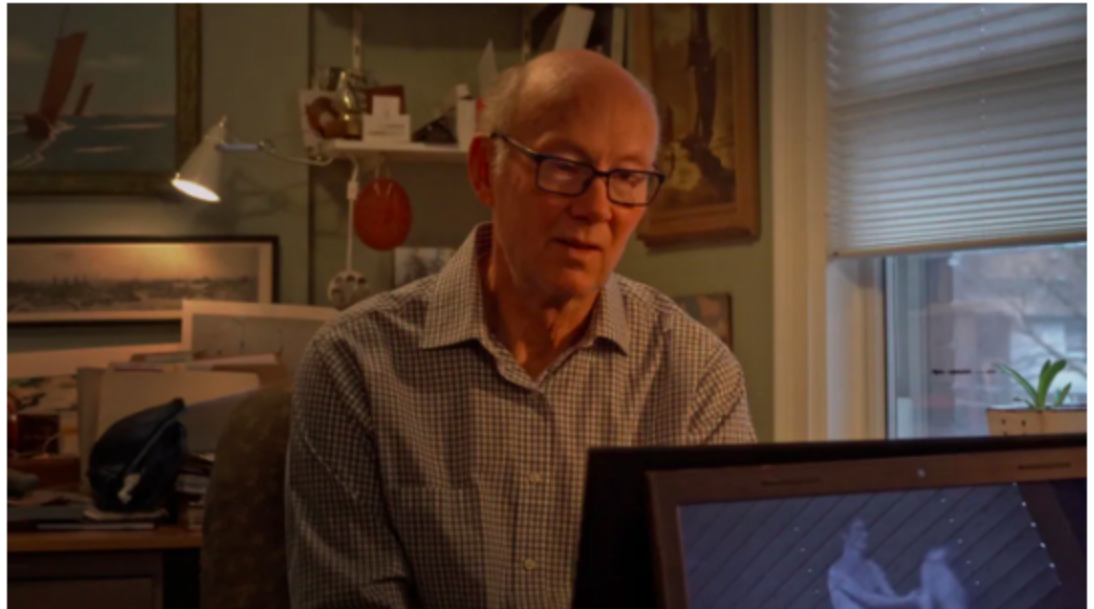
In 2018, artist Jamie Ross was headed for a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts. On the way from Montreal to Alberta, Ross stopped to visit their father in Toronto. During that visit, Ross' father David, whom Ross describes as having been a "stiff, geeky accountant my whole life," disclosed two secrets that he had kept for almost 45 years. David had been to Banff himself, he revealed — not just as a visitor, but as an artist. In 1973, he attended a residency hosted by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, as a ballet dancer. Moreover, during that time, David had a sexual encounter with another man, a fact that came as a shock to Jamie, who is Queer and still, in their words, had a "chip on my shoulder" about the way their father had reacted when Jamie first came out.

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These revelations and the journey of reconciliation and discovery that results are the subjects of Jamie Ross' debut documentary film, *Dad Can Dance*, which premiered at [Hot Docs](#) in Toronto this month and came away with a [Hot Docs Audience Award](#) as the highest-polling short film among the recipients.

Ross, who is currently based in Los Angeles, pursuing a Master of Fine arts degree at UCLA, had planned to use their residency to research aphrodisiacs and poisons. On arrival, however, Ross was so stimulated by their father's story that, "I basically unpacked my bags and went straight to the archives." There, Ross discovered photos and video footage from their father's Banff sojourn.

Almost immediately, Ross planned to make an art project on the subject. "The moment I realized it was a film," Ross recounts, was after they arrived home from Banff and "my dad showed me what he had been doing since he told me." David had not only rekindled his dormant interest in dance, but had begun dancing on his own — and, Jamie explains, "he had started writing these rough, sort of theatrical scores, for me and him to dance."

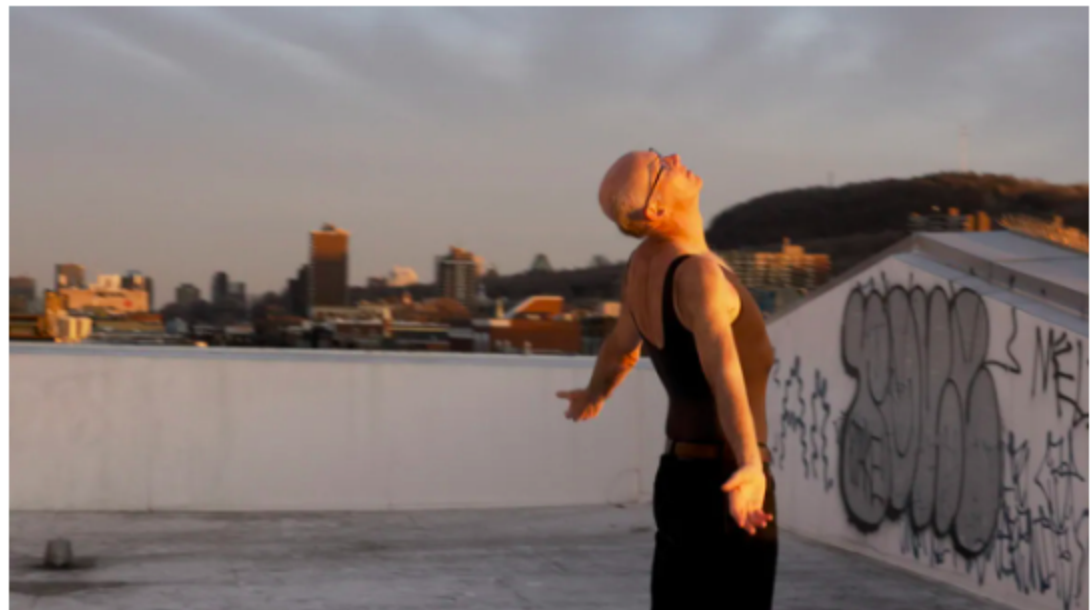


David Ross watches ballet at home, remembering dancing the same piece 50 years earlier. (Dad Can Dance)

By 2019, Jamie had pitched the film and received funding from the Canada Council and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec (CALQ). After that, Jamie tells me, "We basically danced for the next two years."

Over the course of the film, David Ross reconnects with fellow 1970s Banff Centre alumna dancer Evelyn Hart and eventually begins to dance his first solo in 47 years. As the viewer learns, David's residency concluded with a negative review of his potential: he was told that he did not have the "right body," a crushing disappointment that ended his budding career. For *Dad Can Dance*, David trained in contemporary choreography with the help of some of Jamie's friends and colleagues from the dance world—"all queer men," Jamie notes—while adapting the iconic Canadian *pas de deux* presented throughout the '70s and '80s by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, titled *Belong*. We see him dance, with Jamie and solo, across various studios and stages. "He dances every day now," Jamie tells me, and "he wants to dance every day until he no longer can."

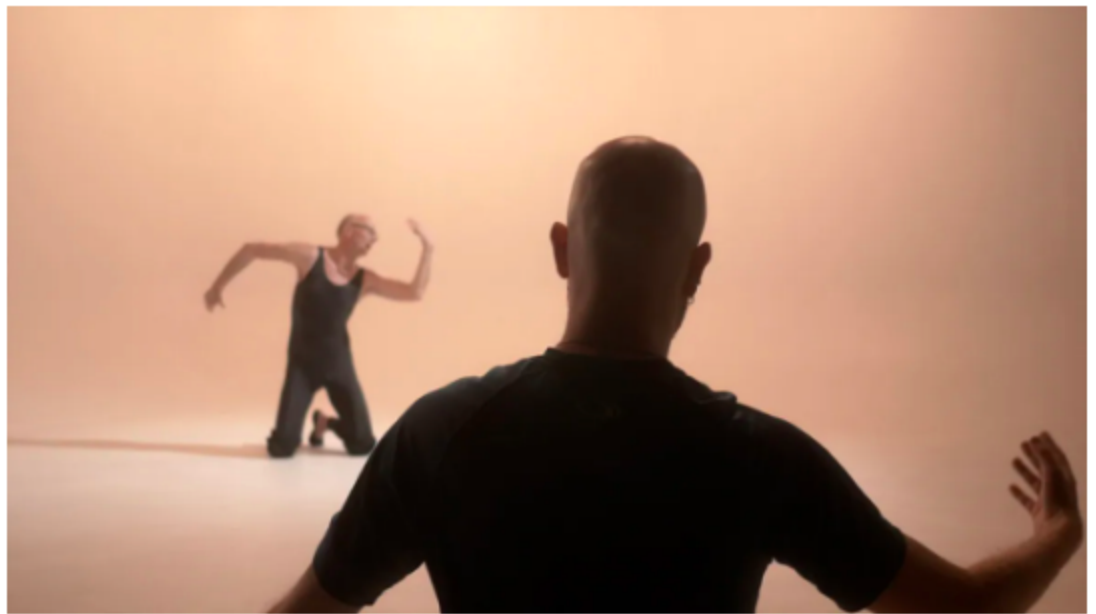
At one point in the film, told in a voice message from David to Jamie, David also re-establishes contact with a man from his 1973 dance residency—but much is left to the viewer's imagination. Though *Dad Can Dance* relates a renewed bond between father and son over shared experiences and interests, and a new understanding and acceptance of Jamie's gender and sexuality, the film grants a certain privacy to David. If he "comes out," it is as a dancer.



At the beginning of the documentary, Jamie narrates "this is a film about secrets." As they explain, "I've been really fed by these ideas of secrecy and the beauty and power of privacy, especially relating to sexuality and to people who are holding trauma related to that...for me, the idea that we don't tell everything and that there are a lot of questions that viewers have is really powerful." It was also essential, for Jamie, that they had their father's trust, and that the film could be accessible and teachable, even "a reparative gesture that could be used as a tool for families."

With regard to seeking information about the past, some of which may never be revealed, Jamie says, "I really was interested in having the viewer adopt my position," the role of a searcher. "I think that anyone who looks through an archive or a library for something specific, there's this feeling of wanting to touch, to reach out and touch something valuable in the past, and I think there's something really inspiring for me about looking for my dad in that light, and wanting him in that light. It really transformed how I saw him, how I saw his body, and then, eventually, how he saw his own body."

As an artist, Jamie had previously produced films for projection and installation in galleries, often around themes of queer history, intergenerational connections, spirituality, and healing. (Their multifarious practice also includes roles as a gardener, herbalist, and [pagan prison chaplain](#).) "I feel like I've identified as a filmmaker for a long time," Jamie affirms. "I feel pretty comfortable with that moniker." However, making a more conventional documentary was a new experience for them, necessitating deep collaboration. "We definitely brought in editors, voice-over script consultants, dramaturges to make this not a piece of experimental, non-linear video art but rather a piece that could be broadcast," Jamie tells me. They especially credit Picture Editor Boban Chaldovich, who helped Ross make decisions about timing, narration, and storytelling.



David and Jamie Ross dance together, dance together after all the secrets have been revealed, in *Dad Can Dance*. (*Dad Can Dance*)

One major decision was how long the film should be. At 28 minutes, it is a *moyen métrage*, a long short. "For me, it was a question about whether or not it was a feature-length film that wanted to be told. And at some points it might have been," Jamie says. They had planned a trip back to Banff that couldn't happen during the pandemic. That visit would have allowed David to go back to the room he had once danced in and consult the archive in person. Jamie also contacted numerous other participants from their father's time in Banff, including from an early video art residency, some of whom contributed their art to *Dad Can Dance*. Many recounted a similar experience of not continuing as artists, but wanting to rekindle their passion.

"There are a lot of potential films within it that we could have expanded and accorded out with," Jamie relates, "but, in the end, we wanted to focus on the power of our reconciliation...It felt like that was something we could do in thirty minutes."

Both Jamie and David Ross also see something crucially timely in *Dad Can Dance*. "I think there's a great personal-is-political dimension to the film about anyone living their dream," Jamie says, "but I think there's an especially piqued interest in queer and gender-non-conforming youth stories right now, given the political climate around these issues." Though they didn't necessarily make the film with this in mind, Jamie notes that "as the trans health care bans for youth are starting to pass throughout North America, really putting into question a lot of queer and trans rights, I think there is an urgency to talk about it." Beyond the heartwarming personal story, Ross sees their film addressing a "changing dynamic" in the public conversations around gender and sexuality. "It goes beyond representation," they emphasize, "to the security of the person."

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