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MOVIE REVIEW

Casting About (2005)

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"Casting About," from the documentary filmmaker Barry J. Hershey ("The Empty Mirror"), is a record of casting calls for lead actresses in a dramatic feature that Mr. Hershey wrote but has yet to direct: a seemingly Hemingwayesque drama involving a wounded combat photographer, a nun, a dancer and a painter's model. From its opening montage of head shots through its fragments of auditions and between-performance chatter, "Casting About" is a solid documentary about how art is made.

But it is also an unnerving inquiry into power relationships: between filmmakers and performers and, more pointedly, between men and women. Even though "Casting About" was photographed by a woman, Allie Humenuk, its gaze, like that of most films, is male — often coldly so. When the camera isn't pushing in close to inspect the actresses' complexions, it's stalking around them and checking out their bodies, part by part. The women act with, and take direction from, a man whose face is never shown.

Yet even as Mr. Hershey and his collaborators visually probe and rate their would-be stars, they also respect their adaptability, tenacity and beauty. The most powerful moments in "Casting About" find the movie surrendering to its female subjects' charisma, fixating on their hand gestures or settling into a static position, the better to watch a woman speak a stranger's words and become someone else.

CASTING ABOUT

Opens today in Manhattan.

Directed by Barry J. Hershey; director of photography, Allie Humenuk; edited by Marc Grossman; produced by Lewis D. Wheeler; released by Kino International. At the Cinema Village, 22 East 12th Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 86 minutes. This film is not rated.

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