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‘Kannapolis’: A portrait of a company town before the company threw in the towel

By Joan Reinthaler | May 23, 2016

In the mid-Depression, pre- and early World War II years from 1936 to 1942, filmmaker H. Lee Waters roamed the Piedmont area filming just plain folks, fooling with emerging techniques that included slow, fast and reverse motion, and playing them back (for a price) to the townspeople he featured. His hours of film eventually made their way to the archives at Duke University, and — fast-forward to 2009 — Duke Performances contacted Jenny Scheinman, a many-faceted violinist-vocalist-composer. So was born “Kannapolis: A Moving Portrait,” a multimedia evocation of a simpler time in the small-town America of the past.

Kannapolis is a town in North Carolina, the home of the Cannon Mills (of bath-towel fame — now closed down), and the hour-long show that Scheinman and her musical collaborators, guitarist-singers Robbie Fulks and Robbie Gjersoe, brought to the National Gallery East Building’s auditorium on Sunday was a beautifully coordinated melding of music and film. In the

winnowing process that pared the film down to one hour, Scheinman chose to focus on children, dancing, labor and community, and the music she wrote — fiddle tunes, country ballads, gospel-like praise of the town's mill industry — fit it beautifully.

Director Finn Taylor and editors Rick LeCompte and Trevor Jolly pieced together a vivid image of small-town life, morphing back and forth almost imperceptibly between black-and-white and color and adding occasional sounds of car engines, squeaky rocking chairs and industrial looms to what was otherwise a silent film.

The performances had the panache that comes with many years of playing together and with lots of time living intensely with the music.