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### DVD Review: Secundaria

Michael Doherty / 05.2016 /

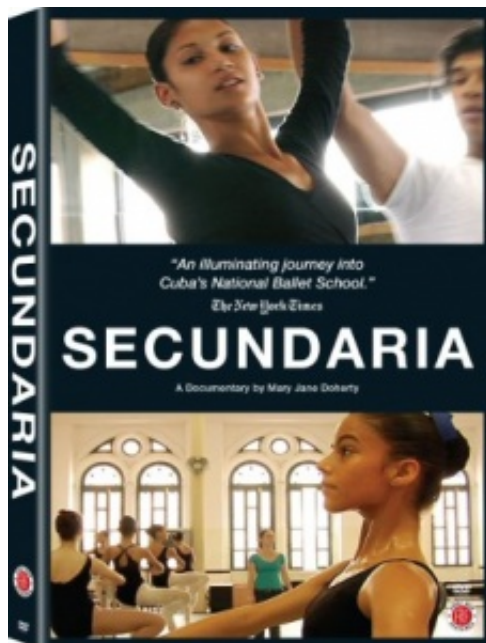
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*Secundaria* is a documentary that follows a class of students through the three-year program at Cuba's famous National Ballet School. It focuses primarily on two students: Mayara, who comes from a poorer neighborhood and who has to take a one-hour bus ride to get to school, and Gabriela, whose family has more money and lives closer

to the school. This film gets us very close to its subjects, and has a wonderfully natural feel, which works to pull us in right from the start.



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We are introduced to both girls at their homes before seeing them at the school. Mayara lives in a two-bedroom home that is apparently infested with termites. We learn that at the beginning of each year the high school sponsors a competition for teenage ballet dancers and uses the results to establish class rankings. In the first year, both Mayara and Gabriela make it to the final round, and Mayara comes in second overall, and as a result is suddenly at the top of her class. This will change Mayara's life in significant ways (and, perhaps just as remarkably, will not affect it in other ways). She is then taught by Martha Iris, Cuba's most famous teacher, and we are treated to footage of their one-on-one lessons. Not everything is subtitled, and because my Spanish is a bit rusty, I just enjoyed the images from these scenes.

Much of the information is presented in voice over narration, rather than in formal interviews with the participants. In scenes at the girls' homes, Mayara and Gabriela and their families do offer their stories, but it's almost like the families are talking among themselves and the camera just happens to capture it, rather than anyone speaking directly to the camera, answering questions. This helps give the film a very natural feel. Plus, all the students and faculty must have become quite accustomed to the camera, for they rarely even acknowledge its presence, and are quite natural around it, even when it is extremely close. And the camera is often tight on its subjects, focusing on details regarding costume, hair and makeup, as well as the dance itself.

At one point, the narrator tells us that Gabriela has injured her toe. But because of how close the camera is on her face, we can see something is wrong before being told. You can read it in her eyes, as she tries to remain strong. It's a very moving moment, and this film has plenty of these moments.

The economics of the area are never too far from the minds of those involved, as when a tour of Cuba is canceled because of lack of a working bus for the students. That's crazy. Crazy still is that the students don't seem surprised or put off by this. Mayara, however, is

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selected for a travel team which goes to South Africa and Italy, and later to Canada. In Italy, Mayara wins the top prize of 500 euros, which as the narrator explains to us, is approximately three times what her mother makes in a year. But the next day that money is taken from her by the school so it can be used to purchase items the school needs. Mayara doesn't seem to make a fuss about this either. But while in Canada, she makes a surprising move.

### Special Features

The DVD includes a photo gallery of images of the film's participants as well as of the area. There is a brief biography of Mary Jane Doherty, and a director's statement regarding the project and her technique.

*Secundaria* was directed and edited by Mary Jane Doherty, and was released on DVD in 2014 through First Run Features.



Michael Doherty

(<http://www.popculturebeast.com/author/michael/>)

Michael Doherty is the co-creator of the web series *Grandmother Winsome's Variety Minute* and the *Grandmother's Fanny Game* blog. In addition to writing for Pop Culture Beast, he has his own music blog (Michael Doherty's Music Log) and a Shakespeare blog (Mostly Shakespeare). Originally from Massachusetts, Michael is a big Red Sox fan (and a baseball fan in general).

His favorite film is *Harold And Maude*. Among his favorite bands are the Grateful Dead, The Peak Show and Josh Lederman Y Los Diablos (none of which are together anymore). His favorite songwriter is Leonard Cohen. His favorite authors are William Shakespeare and Kurt Vonnegut. He's left-handed, a Pisces, a member of no

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fans of [#FindingDory](#)

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religious organizations, has no tattoos, and does not own a tuba or a mandolin (he's okay with not owning a tuba, but would like a left-handed mandolin). He loves Guinness and Sam Adams and cream soda, is generally broke, and would love to own a full-length raccoon coat, like from the 1920s.

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