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Fuse Film Review: "Primaria" — A Penetrating View of the Cuban Ballet System

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Oh, it's a strange world, ballet — full of rituals and practices both beautiful and harsh — some of which Mary Jane Doherty captures with sharp-eyed grace.

Primaria, directed, filmed, edited, and co-produced by **Mary Jane Doherty**. Co-produced by Lyda Kuth.



A scene from "Primaria," Mary Jane Doherty's second feature about the Cuban ballet system.

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Let no one accuse the Boston theater

By Janine Parker

In the world of ballet, Russian companies and their dancers were long considered to be the standard-bearers of the art form. Why so much awe? The training was second to none, particularly for those students who grew up in St. Petersburg's legendary Vaganova Academy of Russian Ballet. Founded in 1738 as the Imperial Ballet School, the institution sifts through hundreds or even thousands of young children who audition each year, selecting only those whose bodies hold the most promise of achieving classical ballet's highly specific "lines" and whose musculatures seem pliant, resilient, and strong enough to handle its formidable physical demands. The holy grail for the mere dozens who are accepted into the school each year is that after eight or so years, they will earn a spot in the "parent" company, the hallowed Mariinsky Ballet.

The training necessary to attaining that height, is, to put it mildly, rigorous, on a par with that of Olympic hopefuls; the names of some of the institution's most famous successes say it all — Nijinsky, Pavlova, Ulanova; Baryshnikov, Makarova, Nureyev. The particular celebrity of the latter three was enhanced by another aspect of Russian ballet's prestige: the mystique that grew from the closed doors of the Soviet Union era. The glimpses the outside world got of these elite dancers were few and impressive; those Russians had something that many others wanted, and ballet academies and companies around the world worked to play catch-up, many of them adopting the specifics of the exacting ballet technique that Russia's renowned teacher Agrippina Vaganova had developed and implemented in St. Petersburg.

Cuba is home to one such flourishing replication, and it's the focus of local filmmaker Mary Jane Doherty's new documentary *Primaria*, which premiered at Boston's Independent Film Festival on May 1. In 1948 Cuban ballerina Alicia Alonso and her husband Fernando founded the Ballet Nacional de Cuba and eventually a school, the Escuela del Ballet, as a feeder to the professional company, both of which continue to produce some of the finest ballet dancers anywhere.

As in Russia — where ballet is a widespread and important tradition, a kind of national pastime that rivals our country's love affair with sports — ballet in Cuba has become highly respected, with training provided for free. Competition for acceptance into the state-funded academy is likewise fierce. While the widespread regard for ballet and the world-class training are part of the attraction, for poorer families another big draw is the safe daily atmosphere, which includes academics and uniforms and food. And, for those who make it all the way through the school and earn a coveted spot in the company, the financial security of a government job is an obvious relief, at least for some. The three children that Doherty follows through four years of their elementary training, come from a range of social backgrounds.

We first meet Alex, Arlette, and Daniela at the end of their elementary schooling, an emotionally mixed time in which they are about to celebrate their achievements thus far with a big performance in Havana's exquisite Gran Teatro de la Habana — as well as find out whether they're advancing into the ballet high school, the crucial next make-or-break step toward a career with the company.

This is Doherty's second feature about the Cuban ballet system. A professor of film production at Boston University, her 2013 *Secundaria*, which focused on some older students who'd already made it into the high school, is due for wider release by First Run Productions soon (*Arts Fuse* feature). During the process of filming that, she apparently began amassing footage of the younger pupils: after *Primaria*'s opening act, Doherty brings us back several years, so

community of being moribund.



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Iris Fanger

On theater
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that we follow Alex, Arlette, and Daniela through the four years leading up to their graduation from elementary school.

Oh, it's a strange world, ballet — and I say this as a longtime performer, teacher, viewer, writer, and lover of the art form — full of rituals and practices both beautiful and harsh, some of which Doherty captures quietly (literally). In *Secundaria*, Doherty narrated occasionally, but in a whisper; in *Primaria*, she is silent, relying instead on infrequent lines of text superimposed over the images, and occasional subtitles translating some of the dialogue. Otherwise, there are snippets of music or ambient sounds of, say, the schoolyard, teeming with laughing and shrieking children. The film is not quite as taciturn as Frederick Wiseman's gorgeous 2009 documentary about the Paris Opéra Ballet, *Le Danse*, but Doherty lets things unfold without holding our hands too tightly.

We get to know Alex, Arlette, and Daniela, a little bit, through scenes of them at home and school, at work and at play. Ever the neutral documentarian, if Doherty has an "opinion" about some of the conditions or situations we see in *Primaria* she is unflinchingly subtle about it. An air of regimentation presides over the children's lives, in the routine formality of their ballet classes — the ballet dancer's life is sometimes referred to that of a monk or a nun — but also in the pervasive grip of communism. They wear uniforms in both cases, but their ballet attire is the same that all dancers wear and their school clothes resemble those required by private schools everywhere. It's chillier, though, to observe the group of girls standing and reciting a promise "to tell Fidel, Commander-in-Chief... if imperialism attacks." Otherwise, the academic scenes are rather charming, the teachers interacting with the students with gentle humor and patience.

To those unfamiliar with it, a typical daily ballet class — in which a time-honored formula of specific exercises must be performed to both develop and maintain strength, stamina, stretch, coordination, musicality — can seem unnecessarily strict. There's a fine line between what is necessary and what is militant; most of the dance class scenes in *Primaria* are the former, but a few spill uncomfortably over into cruelty. One girl, in her first year of pointework, begins crying, pitifully, silently, as she and her classmates hop en pointe, over and over. The tears roll down her face but, as no one tells her to stop, she keeps hopping away. Earlier, Doherty goes back and forth between one of the ballet teachers reading to a group of boys and to the boys themselves. At first, as she reminds that they are still children, they smile; then, as she begins to chastise some of them about their individual "weaknesses," they look mortified, some eyes reddening and glistening. It's painful to watch.

Other ballet documentaries have cast equally open-eyed gazes at the questionable practices of, in particular, the Mariinsky school. In the 1977 classic *Children of Theatre Street*, the genteel narrator, Princess Grace of Monaco, has no comment as a group of auditionees, pre-pubescent girls, stand in front of a panel of the school's teachers and directors while another teacher pushes and prods each child into various positions, testing flexibility. The girls are bare chested, wearing only trunks. A more recent film, 2006's *Ballerina*, has a similar scene. Thirty years later, and the Russians, despite their hard-won freedom, are still in many ways stuck in the past. I don't know if the Cubans, in their children's auditions, are this insensitive, but one cringe-worthy scene in *Primaria* shows the old-school way in which, with a teacher monitoring them, a group of girls worked on their stretches: training in pairs, one would lie on her back, one knee bent, the leg turned in, while her partner stood on her thigh/knee and manipulated the other leg into a deep stretch. We have learned so much about proper alignment of the joints and in that little moment just about every sound idea about knee safety is violated.

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Bill Marx

On theater for
The Arts Fuse

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A scene from "Secundaria," Mary Jane Doherty's first feature about the Cuban ballet system.

But there is, thankfully, much beauty in what Doherty presents. Her camera traces Arlette's bare feet, partially under a bureau, up her long legs and to her arching back as she finds creative ways to stretch her young body in the cramped quarters of her house; her lovely face is often pensive. Daniela, her long hair in two loose ponytails, prances quietly about her house, her finger to her lips as if asking us to keep her secret, while a euphoric smile plays across her lips. Alex, at the end of the film, performs a solo in a nearly empty studio; one can't help but feel, after getting to know these young dancers a bit, a sense of pride to see his growing physical and artistic maturity. There's also, sweetly, a bit of the child in this young man, who bobbles charmingly in his landing from a tour en l'air. We don't really want them to grow up quite so fast, but serious dance students often do. At the end of *Primaria*, we've circled back to the present. There is much to celebrate for Alex and Daniela, who have been given the green light to continue into the high school. And it is truly heartbreaking to learn that the humble, hard-working, poetic Arlette has not. "...because I was overweight," she says, adding, drily, "fat. But I wasn't bad technically. I'm not bad in ballet, but, oh well..."

More than developing their skills, Baryshnikov, Makarova, and Nureyev wanted freedom, both personal and artistic, luxuries those stars achieved in the 1960s and '70s only by "defecting" from Russia, usually while on one of the rare tours to the West. Since the "Iron Curtain" came down, Russian dancers today have that freedom — not so with the Cubans, however. Now when we hear of dancers defecting, it's usually Cuba they are fleeing. It seems that the same kind of staleness that inevitably permeated the art form in Russia during Soviet times has crept into the national ballet system in Cuba, too. Though Ms. Alonso is a revered icon, she is still, at 95, the head of the company. (She's blind, too, but everyone's used to that; she suffered from partial or full blindness for most of her performing career, too.) As Brian Siebert wrote in a recent *New York Times* article, the Cuban defectors "...all cite the same reasons: the Cuban company's stagnant and conservative repertory; the restrictions and capricious decision-making concerning travel and career opportunities outside of Cuba; the poverty."

Indeed, toward the end of *Secundaria*, Mayara, one of the featured young dancers goes missing after a group trip to Italy. She turns up in Miami, and eventually lands a job with Orlando Ballet.

As adults, we know the maxim that life isn't always fair, and sometimes it's our job to try to teach that to youngsters. But sometimes it's not the facts of life at issue, it's humans, who are sometimes just wrong. Arlette is a gifted, beautiful young dancer, whose body "fat," if indeed it

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Noah Schaffer

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can be called that, is likely to go away, if she continued the serious training, as her body changes and matures. In *Secundaria*, Moisés, a young man who graduates at the top of his class, doesn't earn a spot in the company, as had been expected. "We are told," reads the onscreen text, "— off the record — he is the wrong race and the wrong class." Colorism, it turns out, is not just a problem in American and European ballet.

Cuba is, with the recent loosening of sanctions, seemingly at the dawn of the kind of world exposure and personal freedoms that Russia and its people began to experience decades ago. Will Cuba's national ballet system, still in many ways a marvel, catch up to the modern world's greater humanity?

Since 1989, **Janine Parker** has been writing about dance for *The Boston Phoenix* and *The Boston Globe*. A former dancer, locally she performed with Ballet Theatre of Boston, North Atlantic Ballet, Nicola Hawkins Dance Company, and Prometheus Dance. Ms. Parker has been teaching for more than 25 years, and has a long history with Boston Ballet School. She is on the Dance Department faculty of Williams College in Western Massachusetts, where she has lived since 2003. Janine Parker can be reached at parkerzab@hotmail.com.

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