Interview: Filmmaker Beth Kargman Creates Her ‘First Position’

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CHICAGO – The delicate sensibility in the documentary “First Position” would probably had not existed if first-time filmmaker Beth Kargman had not wanted to see the movie herself. As a former ballet dancer, she wanted to go behind the performance for portraits of young dancers as dedicated artists.

“First Position” follows six different competitors in the prestigious Youth America Grand Prix, which focuses on ballet dancers ages 9-19. There are situations that are expected – the intensity of a parent who accommodates and sacrifices, the instructor taskmaster in the studio and the hours of obsessive rehearsal. But when the individual kids are spotlighted, a new truth emerges. Life has a different path for these talents, and each journey has an artistic interpretation within it.



Rebecca Houseknect Waits Backstage in ‘First Position’
Photo credit: Sundance Selects

There is the poignant story of a war orphan from Africa turned ballerina, when an adoptive family in America gives her a second chance. There is the teenager from South America, who sees dance as a step up in his social economic station. And there are the more conventional kids, with a fire in their bellies regarding the art ballet that goes beyond the parental push to take the stage.

HollywoodChicago.com spoke to Beth Kargman via phone, to understand her motivation in creating “First Position.”

HollywoodChicago.com: What is your genesis in doing this documentary, and what was the process for finding the subjects you followed?

Beth Kargman: I danced for the majority of my childhood. This was a film I always wish existed, but it didn’t. I just got tired of waiting for someone else to make it. I wanted to give exclusive, intimate access into the lives of young dancers, and it shows so much more than just stage and studio. I always remember growing up watching wonderful films, with beautiful dancing, but then I’d always wondered, ‘do they go

home and eat a cheeseburger?’ What now? Ballet performance is much more complex than what is frequently portrayed, and I wanted to show what it takes to be a dancer.

As far as which dancers I chose to follow, I only had one mission in mind, and it had nothing to do with trying to pick the winners in the Grand Prix competition, and I’ll tell you why. The most dangerous thing about doing a competition documentary is that when you are trying to pick your characters based on who you think is going to win, you’re risking the entire success of the film on factors you have zero control over. Instead I chose young dancers whose personal stories, personalities and lives outside ballet were so unique and interesting, that even if everyone did poorly at the competition, you still fell in love with the kids.

I also wanted a lot of diversity, a shot at the stereotypes in the ballet world. For example, not all ballet dancers are white, not all ballet dancers are rich, not all skinny ballerinas are anorexic and not all male ballet dancers are gay. Some people think that practicing ballet makes you gay. It’s just ridiculous.

HollywoodChicago.com: Which of your young ballet subjects was the most like a kid and which one astounded you regarding how “adult” in attitude they were?

Kargman: This is a tricky question. Ballet is a mini-adulthood for young dancers. They are so poised and mature from a young age. It’s fascinating, I got an audience question in a recent festival screening that asked, ‘did any of the kid’s act out, and did you A) not want to show it, or (B) never got an opportunity to capture it with camera?’ No is the answer. No ballet teacher or gatekeeper of the ballet world wants a diva, or a kid with behavioral issues. You just don’t see it, because it’s not approved of, and even if you’re a problem child, good luck making it as a dancer. There’s no tolerance for it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Given that there was a black ballerina profiled, with an extraordinary story, why do you think an attitude toward black ballet practitioners still exist? Isn’t it more of class issue?

Kargman: Race is far more complex than I am able to fully articulate in the ballet world. I think it’s so much bigger and deeper than skin color. I will let other people talk about it, I don’t have an agenda and you don’t hear my voice in the film regarding the subject.

HollywoodChicago.com: We do see the parent who pushes hard against her two kids in the process. Where do you think the line is for parental authority in such a discipline and what consequences do you think this kind of push can have on a person later in life?

Kargman: This is what is so fascinating about the young dancers in the film. I am telling you, without a doubt, that even though the parents are extremely involved, it’s the internal engine of these kids that are driving them. Their parents are simply falling into line. In America, ballet requires a whole family buy-in. It’s expensive, and a 12 year-old can’t drive themselves to practice every day.

I think that in ballet in particular, with the individuals that really make it, it’s not the parents fulfilling their dreams through the kid. Ballet is so difficult, so hard on the body and demands so much time in the classroom and in practice. When a kid becomes old enough to think for themselves, if they don’t want to do that kind of discipline, they just won’t do it.

HollywoodChicago.com: It struck me as I was watching the film that the dancer is much like a musician, but uses his or her bodies as a the fine tuned instrument rather than a violin of other implement. What impresses you most about the flexibility and strength of these instruments, and how do subtle body manipulations create more of an art in ballet?



The Dance: Michaela Deprince, Filmmaker Beth Kargman and Miko Forgarty in ‘First Position’
Photo credit: Sundance Selects

Kargman: First off, so much body care and maintenance has to occur to keep the instrument healthy. The most successful dancers have achieved a balance in not over-training or under training. Some people see the film and get upset over extreme chair stretching, but I'll tell you that the girl doing it has never had a major injury. There must be something, because she would have been injured by now.

HollywoodChicago.com: Recently, we had the fictional film 'Black Swan,' which covered much of the territory you cover in your film, albeit in a narrative and much more extreme. What do ballet films like the Black Swan and 'The Red Shoes' do to both advance the art and cause criticism against it?

Kargman: I actually started filming the documentary before 'Black Swan' started filming and found out about it, and thought 'this could be good.' It brought people into the theater and exposed them to dance, who wouldn't have necessarily been exposed to it before. My belief is that my film is different, more 'G-rated.' I like [director] Darren Aronofsky, Natalie Portman and Mila Kunis, I never thought I was going to a ballet film. It was more of a character study.

HollywoodChicago.com: What I find interesting is that ballet classes are a rite of passage for most little girls, yet so few go on to practice it or enjoy it later in life. What do you observe to be the problem with the automatic notion that a little girl should do ballet and how does its reputation get damage in that process?

Kargman: There is this childhood fantasy that ballet is tutus, tights and tiaras. And I think it's great that up to 50% of all American females have taken a ballet class. But to make it to an elite level, you quickly find out that there is not much glamor in it at all. It's similar to Hollywood where everyone looks at these celebrities and thinks they have it easy. I guarantee you that most of those celebrities had to wait tables or do other odd jobs to make ends meet.

Everyone forgets the hard work that is required to make it to an elite level, no matter what what the form of art is, and I think with ballet in my documentary is that very few of the kids complained, even through the rigors of it all, because from an early age they know that this is part of the job description. And not one of their peers in that world is going to feel sorry for them, because they are in the exact same boat.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your documentary does mention that the art of ballet is shrinking in popularity and having funding issues. What are you injecting into your documentary to create more of a cultural buzz?

Kargman: I don't doubt that this film will have a positive effect on the average human being's perspective regarding dance. I've had people telling me they don't even like ballet, but their appreciation was taken to a whole new level when they saw that behind-the-scenes dedication.

HollywoodChicago.com: After making this documentary, and spending so much time with your subjects, what is the richest beauty that comes out of the art of ballet, and where did it touch you most emotionally?

Kargman: What is so wonderful is when the young dancers spend so many hours in studio versus their time on stage, so disproportional, that it's incredible. When they enter a competition, it isn't necessarily to win, but to have more that one opportunity a year to take the stage and experience what is it like to be a professional. Another thing is I see a young dancer work so hard on technique in the classroom, and then something else happens when they get on stage – the artist comes out.

"First Position" continues its limited release in Chicago on May 18th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Aran Bell, Gaya Bommer Yemini, Michaela Deprince, Jules Jarvis Fogarty, Miko Forgarty, Rebecca Houseknecht and Joan Sebastian Zamora. Directed by Bess Kargman. Not rated.

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