

Secundaria: A Complex Portrait of Dance

Over three years of filming, teenage students become accomplished performers

By **Nadine Covert** - February 25, 2014



Courtesy Mary Jane Doherty

Cuba: incubator of talented, world-class ballet dancers. Filmmaker Mary Jane Doherty set out on a special mission. The recent [Dance on Camera](#) festival, copresented by [Dance Films Association](#) and [premiered her documentary \[Secundaria\]\(#\) in New York.](#) Doherty followed a secondary-school ballet company over a three-year period, observing these dedicated teenagers as they study, train, rehearse, and perform. Focusing principally on two girls—the shy and talented Mayara, from a poor family, and the talented and extroverted Gabriela, who lives in a better neighborhood with her mother and father, who works hard to rise to the top of his class. Given carte blanche access, the filmmaker returned home, and on tour, offering intimate glimpses of their successes, failures, and challenges. The film culminates in a startling climax when Mayara makes a sudden, unanticipated decision to defect. Nadine Covert interviewed Mary Jane Doherty via e-mail.

First, tell us a little about yourself and your own career.

I'm an associate professor of film at Boston University and have been teaching there for 23 years on a part-time, fulltime job, but early on I discovered how much I love to teach; now it's as central to my life as my filmmaking. I've mostly commissioned films. Then, several years ago, my teaching load eased, the dog died,

time and space to go back to my other true love: filmmaking. My goal now is to catch up wi

How did this film come about? Had you filmed in Cuba before?

I had never been to Cuba before, but—like many others in the U.S.—I had romantic notions of music and dance. In 2006 I read a short piece in the New York Times, something about “Fourteen flash: beautiful bodies, Latin rhythms, decaying pastel-plastered walls—the sound and visual itself into my lens. Indeed, that’s sort of what happened. Also, I had just finished a cerebral, adamant about finding a story with sensual elements at its base.

So, with only one contact, I jumped on a plane to Cuba, marched into the director’s office with an idea: to immerse myself in the dancers’ lives, focusing only on those moments about the process that can’t be told in words. The director, Ramona de Saá, then and there gave me carte blanche access. I had no prior idea about Cuban ballet or, for that matter, ballet itself. I did not know what the process of filming the teenagers determine the story. (Most documentaries, for good reason, don’t do that treatment.)

Then, Lyda Kuth—she is a major philanthropic force in the New England arts community—stepped in to make this wild gamble. Lyda was and is the proverbial angel we’re all looking for.



Courtesy Mary Jane Doherty

What was it like getting to know the students?

Astonishing in every respect. Such warmth, generosity, patience, tolerance. The students are so respectful of personal space the way we do here in the U.S. In order to get good sound, there were times

intimate. One time I put the camera down and said, "You should tell me to stop filming." The

The experience of working with the dancers grew more emotional with each trip. At first, I couldn't keep track of anyone's name. Soon enough, though, their individual personalities emerged and became less film subjects and more partners and deep friends. It was a thrilling experience with the dancers, but also worrisome: I had an ever-increasing responsibility to make sure the

How did their parents respond when you approached them about filming the girls? Were the

Most, but not all, parents were eager to have their child profiled. I was careful from the very beginning not to view this film as a pathway out: the teenagers would not be paid, there were no guarantees, and the film would actually get made!

Do you speak Spanish? Were you able to communicate directly with students, families, and

Technically, no, I do not speak Spanish. But I knew a little, enough to communicate directly with the dancers on their own hands and jumped around a bit. Of course, we did not need to speak, since everyone understood what the students DO, not what they SAY. I did have a Cuban friend nearby when filming the last part of the filming process itself.



*Gabriela Lugo Moreno
Courtesy Mary Jane Doherty*

You followed this class over three years. How much time did you spend visiting the school, and actually filming?

I traveled to Havana every six to eight weeks, spending a week to ten days each visit. All to the very first day. The students and teachers were introduced to me as a package deal: “Me important that the dance community accept not just me but the film process itself: the stu into my lens. We work together!

Did you do all the filming by yourself? Or did you have a crew with you at times?

Yes, I filmed every moment by myself, operating both camera and sound. So, in essence, I w

Did you travel with the students on tour, or were some of those scenes filmed by others?

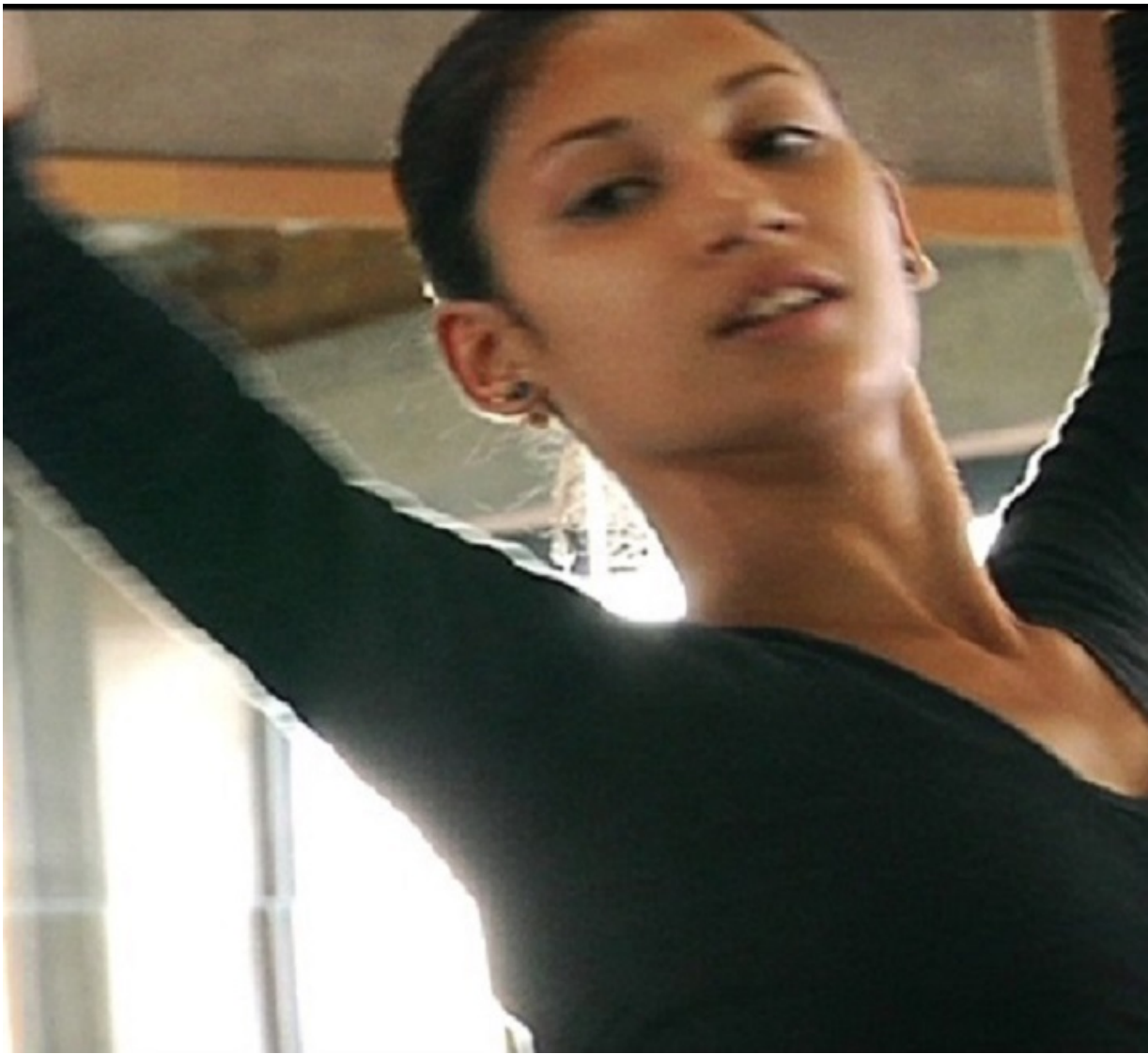
I traveled on my own to each tour location. The students called me “Mary Poppins” because Africa, Italy, Toronto—I always seemed to “pop up.” There are no scenes in the movie filmed video of herself in the mirror.

Did you receive any support from the Cuban authorities to make the film? Was it difficult to

I did not receive financial support from any source, except for travel expenses from Lyda. TI of the Ballet School immediately understood the premise. She knew I was making a film, not the idea of my focus on sensual material only.

Several shooting sessions later, though, a high level Education administrator got wind of the scramble of placatory meetings between the Ministers of Culture, of Education, of Press. No “Yes.” But we found a crack in the circle somehow and, perhaps through sheer persistence, we finally received a signed and stamped letter of approval from the Minister of Culture.

Most of the teachers understood the premise of the film and tolerated me weaving in and out of some, I believe they were gratified that their teaching skills received documentation. But no one formidable teacher thinks I had something to do with Mayara’s defection. It’s difficult to tell everyone else!



Mayara de Jesús Piñero Cantillo
Courtesy Mary Jane Doherty

Did you have any hint that Mayara was considering defecting?

No, I had no idea whatsoever. I was so shocked I could barely hold the camera upright. I am at an airport arrivals door and then, suddenly, the arrivals door shuts. I look up and realize “Mayara is here.” I get blood-draining sensations. But, somehow, I stopped shaking and managed to film the mild clip.

Why do you think ballet is so popular in Cuba?

Back in the 1950s, [Alicia Alonso](#) and [her then-husband] [Fernando Alonso](#) introduced classic American Ballet Theatre training. Alicia is the matriarch of the program to this day, even in Havana (she is now at age 98.) The Alonsos built the program and the audience, the ballet culture, by traveling and exhibitions. Their work coincided with Fidel’s takeover and so ballet was folded into the national culture.



Courtesy Mary Jane Doherty

Tell us a little about the National Ballet School and its program. Is parental support and involvement important? Are there fees involved in attending the School?

The National Ballet School is perceived by Cuban teenage dancers the way medical school is in the U.S.—the program, but if you do, you're virtually guaranteed some kind of job—either as a dancer or as a teacher. Children as young as age seven or eight, work their way through elite elementary ballet training schools just for the chance to become professional dancers. Only the most chosen high school students.

Parents are very much a presence: helping out with makeup, meals, transportation, worrying about their children's education (they are the Cuban version of our U.S. soccer moms!) Technically, the student's skill alone determines their placement in the school. But, just like anywhere, the relationships the parents form with the teachers are crucial.

There are no fees to attend the school. The entire educational process, from elementary through high school, is free.



Moisés León Noriega
Courtesy Mary Jane Doherty

*Have you shown *Secundaria in Havana*? What was the response of the students, teachers, a*

It was shown at the 35th Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano this past December in the international film world, and, for me, it was nerve-wracking. It would be the first time the parents would see the film. Sadly, due to travel and schedules, very few students or teachers portrayed in the film were in time of the festival. So the screening could not, by definition, be the celebratory showcase

Responses were mixed. Some mothers were unhappy that I did not include their child. They said, "My student who left early?" On the other hand, a well-known Cuban dance historian said that "I felt the very soul." A low-level administrator thought that the film was too political. This last remark was from the U.S. wish the film included politics more overtly. You can't win.

Tell us about your plans for distribution. Do you have a U.S. distributor yet, or one in Europe?

We have not figured out a distribution pathway yet. The first year of release is devoted to finding a U.S. version of the film. Bit by bit, we're finding our small but potent audiences, those who respect Cuban art and are learning more and more about Cuban-U.S. art organizations, where more conversations about Cuba can take place. I believe this is where *Secundaria* belongs.



Courtesy Mary Jane Doherty

What's next for you? Any more films in or about Cuba?

I just finished *Primaria*, another film shot at the same time as *Secundaria*. This story, following young people as they grow up and move on, is near and dear to my heart; it does not have the narrative drama of *Secundaria*, but the joy of witnessing young people emerge into ineffably beautiful young adults. (I say this because the characters are so beautiful that they are movie themselves—as if there's no cameraperson or editor.) The entire process of filming was an exercise in pure joy.

What festival or other public screenings are coming up?

The next major festival is the FICCI in Cartagena, Colombia, this March (Festival Internacional de Cine de Cartagena de Indias). The focus shifts to the official rollout of *Primaria*. We'll continue to screen *Secundaria*, but upon

Anything else you want our readers to know about this project?

Some viewers have asked whether I orchestrated any actions, or set up scenes. It's important to know that it was not the case. I shot every single moment on the fly, as it was happening. But this process is filmmaking." Instead, as I mentioned, my characters and I formed a relationship. My job was to capture that relationship through technically satisfying cinematography.

Most films about competitions are shot backwards; the filmmakers film the winners first and then the losers. When they edit the movie, they build a story around those interviews and make sure the audience is hooked from the beginning. The competition itself then provides an appropriate pay-off for the story. This is "competition films."

But *Secundaria* is not a competition film. It did not matter who won, who lost—what matter invited into every corner of the dancers' world. So, for no logical reason, I began filming May beginning. It was sheer coincidence that I happened to pick Mayara, the one dancer who tur

So, I want the audience to trust the journey we go on together, since it's essentially the en

[*Ed. Note:* Mayara Piñeiro currently dances with the Milwaukee (Wisconsin) Ballet.]

Thank you for your time. Good luck with the rollout of this film and with your next projects.

Nadine Covert

Nadine Covert is a specialist in visual arts media with a focus on documentaries. She was for r Film Library Association (EFLA) and Director of its American Film Festival, then the major docum director of the Program for Art on Film, a joint venture of the J. Paul Getty Trust and The Metro board of the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, and is currently a consultant to the Montreal Internat
