



Let's Dance

First Position celebrates the art of ballet

FIRST POSITION: Directed by Bess Kargman. Cinematography, Nick Higgins. Music, Chris Hajian. Editors, Kate Amend and Bess Kargman. With Aran Bell, Michaela DePrince, Miko Fogarty, Rebecca Houseknecht, Joan Sebastian Zamora and Gaya Bommer Yemini. IFC Films, 2012. Not rated. 90 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

First Position is an unfussy, enjoyable documentary that doesn't pretend to be anything other than what it is: an inspirational sports movie about young dancers hoping to enter the highly competitive world of professional ballet. Director Bess Kargman, a journalist and former dancer, has the format down pat: First, find a diverse, charming group of dancers and follow them, skipping neatly from story to story, as they prepare for the super-important, life-changing Youth America Grand Prix, a competition for attention, acclaim, scholarships and positions with international dance companies. Then edit the resulting intimate footage — dancers at home, dancers at practice, dancers floating across the stage — into a compact 90-minute film, its nail-biting finale the Grand Prix's final round.

Kargman starts with 11-year-old Aran Bell, a serious-eyed, incredibly talented boy. Aran is a stunner, but he seems almost ordinary once you see his friend Gaya, who hails from Israel, dance in the competition's semi-final round. She transforms from a grinning pre-teen into an ageless artist, precise and expressive. Each dancer is astonishing, and then you see the next one, and the next, and they're all that good — or better.

The film focuses on kids in the U.S., though two of its subjects were born elsewhere. Michaela DePrince, orphaned in Sierra Leone at a young age and adopted by an American couple, is well aware that she's battling ballet's overt preferences and stereotypes about black dancers. At times, the movie isn't quite sure how to handle Michaela's story, especially when

she discusses her childhood, but her determination gives *First Position* much of its emotional impact. (At least one fist was pumped in the theater when Michaela nailed a vital performance.)

Part of the pleasure of a movie like *First Position* is the way it puts you in the judges' chairs during the carefully edited performance scenes. It would be difficult not to watch the dancers with a critical eye, trying to guess what the judges are looking for, who will win, who will break down after a rough performance. Kargman's subjects are perfectly chosen, from 17-year-old Rebecca Houseknecht, who has the traditional ballerina look but seems unwilling to put aside the expectations of "normal" life and embrace her talent, to 12-year-old Miko Fogarty, who dances with passion and delight while her younger brother stumbles and grins. (Miko's wry coach is an excellent supporting character.) The odd one out among these kids with spacious suburban homes and parents who drive them to practice is Joan Sebastian Zamora, a 16-year-old from Colombia who lives in a tiny apartment in Queens and dances like a star. If there is any doubt about the futures of some of *First Position's* subjects, there's none about Zamora's.

Kargman's film acknowledges but doesn't linger on certain facts of ballet: The hours are long; dancers' feet and bodies get battered, and injuries can be career-destroying; very few dancers, no matter how passionate and talented, become professionals; the cost of coaches and classes and tutus and costumes adds up. But her film isn't a hard look at the life of a future ballerina, or a consideration of how privilege often plays a key part in the accessibility of certain dreams. It's a sweet, straightforward, uplifting film, a celebration of the art of dance and the hard work that goes into creating that art. **EW**

First Position opens Friday, May 25, at the Bijou; bijou-cinemas.com

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	5:15-7:20 THE KID WITH A BIKE 4:15	LIMITED ENGAGEMENT - 6 DAYS ONLY! NORWEGIAN WOOD 6:15	6:15-6:15	6:15-6:15	6:15-6:15	6:15-6:15	6:15-6:15	6:15-6:15
9:25 JIRO DREAMS OF SUSHI ends tonight! 6:15	latente passes accepted! THE RAID: REDEMPTION 9:30	9:30-9:30	9:30-9:30	9:30-9:30	9:30-9:30	9:30-9:30	9:30-9:30	
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