

DANCE

In 'Step,' Finding a Language for Hopes, Fears and Dreams

By GIA KOURLAS AUG. 8, 2017

When Amanda Lipitz started filming the girls at the Baltimore Leadership School for Young Women, they were 11. It was two years before Blessin Giraldo, by then a formidable eighth grader, approached her.

“She said, ‘Next time you come to school with the cameras, you need to film our step team,’” Ms. Lipitz recalled. “‘You’re going to love us.’”

Ms. Lipitz, 37, a Baltimore native and Broadway producer, was making short films about the progress of Baltimore Leadership, a charter school, which her mother started in part to help get young women into college.

Though she had heard about the step team — Ms. Giraldo, now 18, formed it when she was in sixth grade — Ms. Lipitz knew almost nothing about step, a percussive-movement tradition that uses the entire body as well as the voice and is popular in African-American fraternities and sororities. But Ms. Lipitz knows good theater when she sees it.

“It was a musical,” she said. “The music is their claps and their stomps, and the lyrics are the words, and the book is who they are. When they can’t speak about

who they are in their everyday lives, they step. In a musical, you express your hopes and your fears and your dreams through song.”

In “Step,” Ms. Lipitz’s documentary feature, she follows the school’s 19-member team, the Lethal Ladies, during their senior year. The girls prepare for a competition — and for the rest of their lives. Will they get into college? And if they do, will they be able to afford it? All the while, step is their release, their lifeline.

“I believe you see who they really are when they step,” Ms. Lipitz said.

And in the case of the Bob Fosse-obsessed Ms. Giraldo, who has never taken a formal dance class, you see what natural talent looks like. For her, step was always easy. “You don’t have to rely on the beat,” she said in an interview. “You *are* the beat. You create the beat. So whatever you want it to be, whatever direction you want it to go in, you can put it in that direction. It’s creativity.”

“Step” — a hit at the Sundance Film Festival, where it won the special jury award for inspirational filmmaking — also shows the girls’ sometimes difficult home lives. Ms. Giraldo struggles with keeping her grades up at school and not having enough to eat at home. The focus is also on two other Lethal Ladies: Cori Grainger, her class’s quiet valedictorian; and Tayla Solomon, who is as dry as her mother, a corrections officer, is exuberant. “I’m, like, a notch down from Beyoncé,” Ms. Solomon says in the film, “because I do still mess up.”

As we get to know the girls and their families, Ms. Lipitz upends stereotypes — about Baltimore, single mothers and young black girls in urban communities. Little is sentimental or sugarcoated; Ms. Lipitz is interested in nuance. “You have the corrections officer who tells you that as a black woman in Baltimore, the police were her biggest heroes,” she said. “When I saw an opportunity to turn something on its head I did.”

Ms. Lipitz said one of her biggest lessons making “Step” had to do with understanding poverty, not race. “Poverty is having a home and going to school and having a job and a car and living on food stamps,” she said. “I don’t think people really understand that.”

As she sees it, an activity like step — but any creative outlet in the arts or sciences will do — can be a game changer for young people. “You must have something that keeps kids connected to school that is not academic,” she said. “Blessin will flat out tell you there were many days she did not want to come to school, but she did because she knew if she didn’t go to school she didn’t go to step practice, and she needed to go to step practice.”

Step gave Ms. Grainger, who now attends Johns Hopkins University, something else: confidence.

“I literally had to raise my voice,” she said. “And that’s not something that I would be comfortable doing before.” That carried over to her life beyond the stage, too. “When I’m in my computer science classes, and there’s that question that I don’t understand, I’m not afraid to ask it.”

Ms. Grainger said she planned to join Johns Hopkins’s step team, *Eruption*, this fall. Ms. Solomon, however, has no plans to resume stepping — though she’s still performing as part of the film’s publicity. “We actually thought that we were done after graduation,” she said. “Then the movie blew up, and we were like, ‘We’ve got to bring the boots out of the closets.’”

On Aug. 14, the Lethal Ladies team will appear on “So You Think You Can Dance.” In the film, though, it’s not just members of the step team who are critical to the story; it’s also their mentors — counselors, teachers and, above all, the team’s coach, Gari McIntyre.

A Baltimore native and the first in her family to graduate college, Ms. McIntyre in the film talks to the girls about Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old black man who sustained a fatal spinal cord injury while in police custody in 2015. Ms. McIntyre’s goal was not solely to transform the group’s choreography, but she is the reason it began to focus on themes of empowerment and on subjects like Black Lives Matter. Before she arrived, the team performed tributes to artists like Beyoncé.

“My job was to mentor these young ladies first,” she said. “Their step coaches

before me were great with choreography, but I think that they were missing the whole piece about the solidarity, the discipline, the self-esteem, the education. I think they were missing the one-on-one connection that is the essence of step. I knew that coming in.”

For viewers, that transformation among the girls is palpable. “It was the Freddie Gray riots and our passion for stepping and the way people look at us when we perform,” Ms. Giraldo said. “They don’t listen to us most of the time because we’re these black girls from the ’hood or however people want to label us.”

But when they’re onstage, they’re fearless. “You’re going to watch us,” she continued. “We’re demanding your attention. That’s why we included a message. It was our last year.” Ms. Giraldo smiled brightly. “We had to leave with a bang.”

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