

Satisfaction or Hard Labour? Portrait of a Ballet School in 52 Percent by Rafał Skalski

There are certain trends and standard ways in which ballet is represented in cinema. One of them is ballet shown as a fairytale, where, despite the hard work involved, everything functions in accordance with accepted sets of rules and according to a certain order. *The Red Shoes* is a perfect example of such a depiction of ballet. A girl is torn between her love for ballet and her affection for a man, recreating the pattern of a melodramatic fairy tale. The fairy-tale character of the film is additionally emphasized by the independent life of objects, such as ballet pumps, which have a life of their own and in the tragic ending even decide the fate of the main character.

Another type of representation is the perception of dance as self-fulfillment and a means of finding one's real self. Defying his background and despite his father's bewilderment and objection, Billy Elliot decides to find his true self in dancing, which becomes his true passion.

In the third trend, perfectly represented in Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan*, ballet is a chore to carry out, and can even cause one to lose one's mind. A similar portrait of a ballerina appears in the Norwegian documentary *A Beautiful Tragedy*, which tells a story of 15-year-old Oksana, who tries to meet her mother's expectations and become a principal dancer. This leads to the questions "How is ballet presented in documentaries?" and more particularly, "Is Central European cinema different from the cinema form the West in this respect?"

52 Percent, Rafał Skalski's documentary about Alla, a girl who dreams of becoming a ballerina, provides an intriguing answer to this question. The girl tries to enroll in the famous Russian Agrippina Vaganova Academy of Russian Ballet in Sankt Petersburg. The exams are extremely difficult, and she must do additional exercise to lengthen her legs (she lacks 0.4% to achieve the perfect leg-upper body ratio.) This article compares Skalski's documentary with two documentaries made in the West, which also show the endeavours of young people who want to fulfill their dreams of becoming ballet dancers.

In *Only When I Dance*, two teenagers from poor families in the USA want to devote their lives to dance. Their families try to raise funds to make their children's dreams come true. In the film *First position*, we follow six young dancers from different parts of the world as they prepare for the Youth America Grand Prix, one of the most prestigious ballet competitions in the world.



The 52 Percent,
dir. Rafał Skalski, 2007

young people who have grown up poor and struggled to make their dreams come true. Ballet films also typically feature emotional scenes in which young dancers meet celebrated artists. However, there are no such scenes in Skalski's film. The audience do not know Alla's and her mother's background. It is also not easy to conclude anything from the quite modest flat they live in. Even if Alla is poor, this fact is not used in the film as an explanation for the choices she makes. There are also no uplifting scenes in which the girl meets teachers or mentors who encourage her to try harder. By means of several suggestive shots, the teachers in the ballet school are portrayed as bored people equipped with pens and rulers. They are only interested in measurements and proportions, and they decide the fate of the children with a short YES or NO. They do not resemble judges from the West, who smile and encourage young people to work hard. The different presentation of reality is also pronounced in the image of the schools. While in *First Position* or *Only When I Dance*, the scenes from rehearsal rooms are beautiful, spectacular and evocative, the final shots of the ballet school building in *52 Percent* show its greyness and soullessness. There is no place for Alla in it.

The girl cannot make her legs longer, although she tries hard to do so. Her days are filled with exercise, filmed in long static shots. There is no joy or enthusiasm. Sweat and tiredness are a part of strenuous exercise. Alla does not spin on a roof, nor does she jump rhythmically while cooking, like the characters of *First Position* and *Only When I Dance*.



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Her effort is grey and seems boring, as it is filmed from one camera position throughout. The static, dull scenes are only enlivened by the movement of a cat that enters the frame at times. It is significant that the girl only does exercises and hardly ever dances.

There is nothing from a fairy tale or Hollywood in her experiences. A skinny body, stripped to briefs and exposed in front of the jury does not resemble the well-dressed, always smiling young dancers from the other two films. Alla never performs in a costume, while the children from the West even rehearse in bright costumes that enliven the frame. The

colours of grey that Skalski chose to use perfectly match the surgical precision of the jury. There is nothing in his film that would bring joy or the promise of a beautiful career. However, there is a slow, but suggestive build-up of tension that makes the audience support the main character, and so the ending of the film comes as a disappointment. The director, making reference to Krzysztof Kieślowski's technique, says that "It is good to make a feature film as if it was a documentary and a documentary as if it was a feature." *52 Percent* takes advantage of what we are used to in Hollywood films, where endeavours must be awarded and end in success. The bigger the clash between *52 Percent* and ballet stories from the West, the bigger the disappointment of those who root for the little dancer when the ending turns out to be a non-Hollywood one.



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The figures of the young dancers in *First Position* and *Only When I Dance* are filmed in accordance with the traditional perception of ballet artists. Hence, "incredible bodies" often appear surreal on the screen. In many shots, we can see the dancers from afar, in geometrical figures, looking unlike humans. This makes us direct our attention at the virtuosity of their show. The dancers remain silent throughout the show; not only their voices, but also their bodies cannot be heard. The situation is different in *52 Percent*, where the body is bent and stretched and often "speaks". There are noises that resemble breaking bones and extreme flexing of the muscles. Alla's body protests against being subjected to all these procedures. The viewer's ear is additionally irritated by a ticking clock which reminds everyone that time is passing.

Skalski's film breaks the myth of the dancer's body as strong and inexhaustible. This is how we traditionally look at ballet, where there is no place for showing weakness. Here, Alla's body, presented in uncompromising detail, emphasizes her fatigue throughout the film. Almost all the famous ballet dancers say that ballet is in some sense against nature. Dancers work hard to stretch and bend their joints and spines, which is unnatural. All this effort often seems pointless. We are moved by the words of Alla, who, unlike girls from the West, says that she does not want to be a principal dancer, and that she will be happy playing even minor roles. She only wants to be close to ballet.

In feature films, Aronofski is probably the only one who takes the same perspective as Skalski. In *Black Swan*, the director also shows the truth about the body that gets tired or even exhausted. But each of these two films has a completely different message.



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The endings of the films additionally strengthen their meaning. The optimism of *Only When I Dance* and *First Position* is enhanced here by sound, colour and a happy ending. In these projects, the difficulties that arise on the characters' way are meant to be overcome. In this respect, they resemble feature films such as *Billy Elliot*. A dream that comes true for the characters from the Western world, remains unattainable for Alla. The final shots of the film show several ballet dancers at whom the camera peeps from behind a window. One of them looks as if she has been cut in half, her body is totally asymmetrical. We cannot see her face, but we can read this finale in at least two ways: This could be Alla or any other girl, who was so close to her dream, or the distorted figure reflects the dramatic battle of ballet dancers against the weaknesses of the body. This whole world must be distorted, if as little as 0.4% can decide someone's fate and shatter their dreams. There is a certain Central European pessimism in this. As Aleksander Fiut states in *To Be or Not to Be Central European*, here self-centred and optimistic western Europe sees itself in a distorting mirror of pessimism, which exposes its mechanisms and disturbs its comfort.

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Ashes, dir. Eugeniusz Pankov,
prod. Polish National Film School in Lodz, 2013