

Called to the Barre

RWB hopefuls step into the spotlight in the documentary film TuTuMUCH

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Sweating through a summer of ballet classes may sound like the ultimate torture to the average, flex-footed human. But not to the ambitious preteen subjects of documentary TuTuMUCH, playing at SilverCity's Polo Park and St. Vital locations on Sunday and Wednesday.

It seems the blistered, body-suited would-be ballerinas at the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School's elite summer camp are suckers for many forms of punishment — bleeding toes, 9 p.m. curfews, strict dress codes, endless barre routines — at the hands of instructors who aren't afraid to tell them they were born with the wrong kind of feet and have mottos like, "Lots of pain; lots of gain."

Though really, there is truth to that statement. While the RWB School's summer session feels like a month-long audition, it can lead to a glistening career in the ballet biz — as it did for 1976 grad Evelyn Hart.

"The process to becoming a ballerina is a really fascinating story," says TuTuMUCH producer Vonnie Von Helmolt. "And I don't think anyone, unless you're in a dance class and doing it yourself, has any real idea what actually goes into being a dancer."

"It's astonishing to me to see these little girls who are, like, 11 years old, who know what they want to do. It wasn't like when I was 11, I was saying 'I've gotta make movies.' And yet these little kids — 11, 12, 13 — they're going, 'I'm going to be a dancer, and I don't care what it takes. I will go through all this rigour, all this discipline — I will work my buns off.'"

Nine particular pairs of buns are featured in TuTuMUCH, which follows the RWB camp from its first audition — where 1,000 young dancers from all over the globe compete for 70 spots in the four-week camp — and culminates with a select few earning spots in the company's coveted school, while the broken-hearted majority head back to their hometowns.

Among the bunch is Melissa — a fiery-haired, outspoken American who's as full of 'tude as she is of talent; 11-year-old Alicja, a Winnipegger who believes "going through summer without ballet is like going through summer without ice cream"; brace-faced West Coaster Raquel, who can perform any dance style under the sun; and Winnipeg's Carmen Feng, who recently told us the whole experience has made her burgeoning dance career slightly less painful.

"I think in a way it almost makes me less nervous for auditions because, to me, that summer session was a month-long audition, so you just get used to the feeling," says Feng, now in level five of the RWB School program.

Feng was 11 when the doc was shot in 2005, meaning next week's big-screen engagement has been a long time coming for Winnipeg native Von Helmolt's crew.

"When we originally had the idea of doing this behind-the-scenes view of how you have to start to be a ballerina, we envisioned it as a feature," she says.

Her contacts at Bravo! however, saw it as a three-part miniseries. So Von Helmolt shot it as that — while simultaneously shooting footage for what would eventually become TuTuMUCH. The series, a co-production with Merit Motion Pictures entitled Ballet Girls, hit Bravo! in 2006. But after a chance meeting with Cineplex Odeon, Von Helmolt — whose other dance films include 2002's Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary with Guy Maddin, 2005's The Tale of the Magic Flute and fellow Merit co-productions Ballet High (2009) and Bunheads (upcoming) — managed to get TuTuMUCH right where she wanted it: In 59 theatres across the country.

"It's pretty darn major," she says. "Especially for a little arts documentary. For an arts documentary, that's pretty much the last thing you'd expect to happen."

TuTuMUCH's dedicated subjects are to thank, she says, adding their story should be interesting even to those flex-footed types.

"You look at what they go through and nobody's putting a gun to their heads. They're doing this because they really, really want to. One of the things I found the most telling was this scene where one of the little girls is being criticized. Her teacher is saying, 'Pull in your tummy,' and the whole class is watching her. Then, right after that, you see her in her dorm saying, 'They're really pushing us now ... and it's so cool!'

"In this day and age, people think kids have it easy and they don't know how to push, and they don't know how to persevere, and they don't know how to work hard. Well, some do. That's for sure."

And if you or someone you know is one of them, auditions for acceptance into the 2010 summer session take place Sun., Jan. 31 at the RWB's Graham Street headquarters. Call 957-3467 or see www.rwbschool.com for details.