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INTERNATIONAL

Presents

THE FITS

A FILM BY ANNA ROSE HOLMER



World Premiere – Venice International Film Festival 2015
North American Premiere – Sundance Film Festival 2016



2015 / USA / RT: 72 minutes / Unrated
Filmed on ARRI Amira 2K / Exhibited on DCP / Aspect Ratio 2.35 / Color

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Logline

Tomboy Toni lands a spot on the Lionesses Dance Team, but when members of the group begin to experience a series of mysterious spasms -- "the fits" -- she fears how far she must go to fit in.

Short Synopsis

Eleven-year-old tomboy Toni (a showstopping Royalty Hightower) is bewitched by the tight-knit dance team she sees practicing in the same Cincinnati gymnasium where she boxes. Enamored by the power and confidence of the strong community of girls, Toni spends less and less time boxing with her older brother, and instead eagerly absorbs the dance routines and masters drills from a distance, and even pierces her own ears in an effort to fit in. But when a mysterious outbreak of fainting spells plagues the team, Toni's desire for acceptance becomes more complicated. Gorgeously shot and with a mesmerizing score, THE FITS is a transformative experience and a marvelous portrait of adolescence.

Detailed Synopsis

Toni trains as a boxer with her brother at a community center in Cincinnati's West End, but becomes fascinated by the dance team that also practices there. Enamored by their strength and confidence, Toni eventually joins the group, eagerly absorbing routines, mastering drills, and even piercing her own ears to fit in. As she discovers the joys of dance and of female camaraderie, she grapples with her individual identity amid her newly defined social sphere.

Shortly after Toni joins the team, the captain faints during practice. By the end of the week, most of the girls on the team suffer from episodes of fainting, swooning, moaning, and shaking in a seemingly uncontrollable catharsis. Soon, however, the girls on the team embrace these mysterious spasms, transforming them into a rite of passage. Toni fears "the fits" but is equally afraid of losing her place just as she's found her footing. Caught between her need for control and her desire for acceptance, Toni must decide how far she will go to embody her new ideals.

Director's Statement



We collaborated with Queen City Boxing Club and the Q-Kidz Dance Team to cast real teenagers from the West End of Cincinnati. Working with young athletes allowed us to focus on the physicality and nuanced movements we needed to tell the story from beginning to end. Casting all of the girls from the same real-life dance team meant that we could emphasize the authentic sisterhood and collective memory-making that young women experience when they bond on a team. We filmed *THE FITS* in an immersive environment, living on location and inviting the young cast to see themselves not just as performers, but as co-authors of the characters on screen.

At its heart, *THE FITS* is a meditation on movement as seen from the perspective of adolescent girls. The film explores the particularly young female phenomenon of mass hysteria, also known as mass psychogenic illness. The rapid spread of symptoms affects members of a cohesive group whereby physical ills have no corresponding organic cause. *THE FITS* juxtaposes the precise, powerful, and intentional movements of drill with subconscious, spontaneous, and uncontrolled movements of collective hysterics.

I directed *THE FITS* as a dance film, considering the movements of the actors and camera to be choreography in each scene. From stand battles to obsessive workouts, from the way Toni carries her body down the hallway to the freedom in Beezy's play, we approached storytelling from the physical performance first. Through these movements, we explored our thematic questions:

What are the indications of belonging to a group and how do those markers develop?

How do girls use their bodies as a mode of communication?

What is the self?

Is the body separate from the self?

Is identity a performance?

How does one differentiate between self and other?

Is it possible to truly betray one's self?

On the inspiration for THE FITS

I knew about historical cases of hysterics and had always been interested in the broader phenomenon of contagions. The “Dancing Plague of 1518” and “Lisztomania” were some of the most fascinating cases to me, big cultural moments. I read long-form nonfiction articles on a daily basis and came across some more recent accounts about these episodes with groups of teenage girls in the United States. I obsessively researched these mysterious cases and started looking for narrative patterns. The majority of the episodes I learned about took place in tight-knit groups of girls with a strong hierarchical structure. I was also surprised that none of the cases ever seemed to be formally resolved or explained in any way. The idea of making a dance film came early on as well. I watched cell phone videos online that girls had recorded of each other’s ticks, fits, and fainting. Re-imagining these subconscious movements as choreographies provided the foundation of the film.

On discovering the Q-Kidz

A couple of the recent cases I was looking at took place in groups of cheerleaders, but that world didn’t seem to fit my creative vision. I was looking for a choreographic language that better articulated Toni’s internal struggle. I started observing a step team in Brooklyn to learn more about that dance form and the lexicon of its movement. I watched endless step routines on YouTube, just clicking on every recommended video. A cell phone video recording of The Q-Kidz Junior Squad doing a stand battle was suggested, and I had a very strong emotional connection to it right away. From that first video clip, I knew instinctively that drill was the dance form for *The Fits* that I had been looking for. In stand battle, the captain of the team picks a routine on her own and dances the first few steps. The team immediately mimics her and they dance in unison. This call and response through movement spoke to the greater themes of the film because the tension between individuality and conformity is present in the dance form itself. Also, drill has a narrative element to it, often incorporating mundane movements: punches, laughter, hair styling, etc. into the choreography. I fell in love with drill and the Q-Kidz simultaneously. We never considered any other team.

From the film’s conception, I wanted to cast a real community of girls for the film. Casting all of the girls from the same real life drill team meant that we could emphasize the authentic sisterhood that young women experience when they bond on a team. There is this texture or underlying current that I knew we couldn’t pull off otherwise. So we knew when we approached the Q-Kidz that we were looking to cast not only a few of the leads, but really cast the entire team in our project. The founder of the Q-Kidz, Marquicia Jones-Woods, immediately understood the film and supported the vision. She was on board before the first draft of the script and worked closely with us as an Associate Producer. Ms. Quicy (as she is known) played an integral role in the filmmaking process. We cast about 45 of the girls from her team of over 200 to be part of the film. The only role we considered casting outside of the team was Toni; however, we fortuitously found Royalty on day one of the Q-Kidz casting.

On casting Royalty Hightower

We originally wrote the part of Toni as a 13-year-old and opened casting to age eleven and up. Thankfully, another girl asked if 9-year-olds could audition and I politely lowered the audition age to give the experience of auditioning to a larger group of the kids. Royalty auditioned on day one. She was only the eighth girl that we saw read for Toni. We filmed the audition. It was a short, simple scene between Beezy and Toni. What blew me away about Royalty's reading was that she listened to the other performer. We had them switch roles and read again. She was so expressive with her body language and patient with her pacing and delivery. I could see her internalizing the performance of the other actor and adjusting in real time. When she left the room, Cinematographer Paul Yee and I just looked at each other and knew she had something special. She emoted even when she wasn't delivering a line, and that was the key to portraying Toni. When Alexis came and improvised as Beezy, it was a similar strike of lightning. We started to think about casting two 9-year-olds in the film and ended up re-drafting the script with an 11-year-old Toni. It actually ended up being better for the narrative to skew younger, because there was a much more dramatic difference between the body of Toni and the body of Legs. By the end of the second day of auditions, I told producer Lisa Kjerulff that the only person I could see as Toni was Royalty.

Royalty was incredible. She brought such a mature and nuanced focus to Toni. She could genuinely step outside herself. She trained to box for about three weeks before shooting. The speed with which she was able to absorb new information and skills was mind-boggling. We shot the entire film out of order, so she had to constantly pop into a subtle character arc that was entirely internal. We discussed the differences between daydreaming and being dazed, longing and desire, disappointment and motivation, knowing and understanding. She was a physical performer, and sometimes I would have her run sprints before takes so that she was more aware of her body during the scene. As a dancer, she is so athletic and focused. That part of Toni was easy for her to tap into.

On collaborating with the choreographers for the film

For all of the drill choreography, we worked with the head coaches and choreographers of the Q-Kidz, Mariah and Chariah Jones. We scripted in stand-battle and parade routines because I felt that those were the most suggestive forms of drill for the narrative. I lived on location for five weeks before we started filming, and most of that time was spent studying choreography. We discussed the themes of the film and tried to build movement into the stand-battle routines that could both highlight the intensity of drill and the internal arc of Toni. The same choreography needed to tell a different story as Toni was evolving throughout the film. Mariah and Chariah choreographed four main stand-battle routines and the parade sequence. We wanted the parade routine to be light and glittery, much cuter than the stands. It was great to work with them because they coach these girls every day. There was a shorthand with their dancers and they knew how to push the girls to achieve their vision.

We also worked with dancer/filmmaker Celia Rowilson-Hall. We sought her as a movement consultant to focus on the choreography of the "fits" themselves. In reality, these episodes usually present with identical symptoms for each girl. In the film, I wanted each "fit" to be a more

personal experience, part of a larger pattern but individualized. We had each of the girls work with Celia one-on-one to develop her “fit” in isolation. They had no visual reference for what the other “fits” would look like. Celia and I discussed trigger points, both physically and mentally for each character, but each girl also brought a lot of herself to those moments. We wanted to make a safe space for them to explore their personal stressors and fears through dance. Royalty’s “fit” as Toni was the most structured for us. At that stage in the film she is grappling with so many invisible forces. The girls only saw each other’s “fit” on the day they were filmed and it was important to us to protect the sanctity of those moments.

In addition to choreographing the “fits,” Celia worked with me on the more subtle choreography of the film. I wanted to place all of the narrative tension inside of Toni’s body. With Royalty, Celia workshopped how Toni carried herself down the hallway and how that evolved over time. We discussed gendered movements, and tried to create a contrast in how Toni moves through the “boy’s world” vs. the “girl’s world.” We often discussed when Toni would breathe in a scene, so even inhaling and exhaling became choreographic moments in this film.

On translating documentary principals to fiction features

My two key collaborators (Lisa Kjerulff Producer/Co-Writer and Saela Davis Editor/Co-Writer) and I come from a doc-heavy background. We aimed to continue the principle of community-based filmmaking in an immersive environment. We could not have made this film without the support of the West End community in Cincinnati. We shot most of the film in a single location, adapting the script when necessary to fit in that world. The staff at the community center where we filmed was incredibly generous. The building itself is the space where the Q-Kidz practiced. Even the pool and the overpass are within a quarter-mile of the center. The local community didn’t just embrace our film; they shaped it. We spent a lot of time listening and observing and weaved that reality into our vision of the film. In documentary filmmaking, the concept of shared authorship is generally accepted. We wanted to apply that collaborative nature to a narrative structure.

Also, the types of documentaries that we’ve made are told through action unfolding instead of through dialogue-heavy scenes. In vérité filmmaking, you rarely capture a dialogue exchange that perfectly voices the sentiments of the moment. You rely on body language and facial expressions to tell that story more articulately, and I certainly developed a concept of kinetic and non-verbal storytelling from my vérité background.

On participating in the Venice Biennale Cinema College

Developing and producing *The Fits* through the Venice Biennale Cinema College program has been the single most rewarding process of my creative career. I didn’t just develop this project, but also developed my own directing voice and leadership style through this process. One of the elements that I connected to was the idea that you have a creative producer present from the first phase of development, and Lisa Kjerulff was on board to build this film together from scratch. Drafting a script that is intended to be produced and considering the production elements while working on the page helped us tighten our narrative and focus the story. In addition, we connected with filmmakers from all over the world, who hold different beliefs about

cinema and what it can do. We thrived off of that diversity and it challenged us to better understand our own creative impulses.

Making a micro-budget film on an accelerated timeline has been a gift to me as a first-time director. The objective of the Biennale initiative was clear: pitch a film that could be developed, written, produced, edited, and premiered in under a year...and with a budget of only 150,000 Euros (Roughly \$163,000) From the moment of conception, we designed *The Fits* around those constraints.

I applied to the Biennale Cinema College because it seemed like the best possible way for me to direct my first narrative feature. When the Biennale accepted *The Fits*, however, I received something greater than just financing and a prestigious premiere; I was given the gift of limitations to push up against. The circumstances shaped both the film and my own creative process. I quickly learned that directing does not require brains; it requires guts. I didn't have the luxury of time to worry or doubt or second-guess my vision. Making a film at this speed forced me to exercise a different strength altogether. I learned to trust my collaborators, to lead by taking action, to problem solve in the moment, to forgive, to avoid agonizing, and to be constantly present. I had to believe in the instincts of others, and most importantly, myself.

Cast Bios

Royalty Hightower (Toni)

Royalty Hightower was born and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio, and started dancing before she could walk. She joined the Q-Kidz Dance Team at age six, and competes nationally on their junior squad in the field show, parade, stand battle, and creative dance categories. She is a self-learner and even taught herself how to do back flips. Royalty enjoys dancing, acting, rapping, cooking, and gymnastics and is an honor roll student. She was cast as Toni in *The Fits* at age nine and this is her first on-screen role.

Q-Kidz Dance Team

The Q-Kidz Dance Team began 29 years ago in the West End of Cincinnati. The violence in the surrounding housing projects led Marquicia Jones-Woods to look for something the neighborhood kids could do after school to keep them safe and productive. Q-Kidz is far more than a dance team though. Marquicia -- Ms. Quicy (pronounced Kwee-cee) as she's known to all the girls -- and her 25-year-old identical twin daughters who choreograph the dances, Mariah and Chariah Jones, devote themselves entirely to these girls.

First, they teach them how to dance, but more than that, they instill values about the importance of a good education, living drug free and stopping the violence in their community. The girls all refer to Ms Quicy as a second mom. Makyla Burnam, team captain (and Legs in THE FITS), says, "Ms. Quicy has taught me everything that I need to know, about Drill, about Dance and about being myself -- respecting myself as a young woman."

Filmmaker Bios

Anna Rose Holmer (*Director/Writer/Producer*) was listed as one of *Filmmaker Magazine's* "25 New Faces of Independent Film 2015." Her narrative directorial debut, *THE FITS* (Venice International Film Festival 2015), is a selection of the Venice Biennale College 2014/2015 and the Sundance Institute Editing Intensive Fellowship. She recently produced Jody Lee Lipes's *BALLET 422* (Tribeca Film Festival 2014, Magnolia Pictures) and Mike Plunkett's *SALERO* (IDFA 2015). With filmmaker Matt Wolf, Anna co-directed and produced *A BALLET IN SNEAKERS: JEROME ROBBINS AND OPUS JAZZ*, a companion documentary to *NY Export: Opus Jazz*, (SXSW 2010 Emerging Visions Audience Award) which aired on the PBS Great Performances/Dance in America Series. Anna's first documentary feature, *TWELVE WAYS TO SUNDAY*, was one of ten films to participate in IFP's 2009 Documentary Filmmaker Lab and premiered with Rooftop Films in 2010.

Lisa Kjerulff (*Producer/Co-Writer*) is a producer and co-writer for Anna Rose Holmer's feature narrative, *THE FITS* (Venice International Film Festival 2015). Lisa recently completed production on Zachary Shedd's *AMERICANA*, a feature narrative she produced in partnership with Flies Collective. Lisa has produced music videos (Small Black, Sinkane, Devendra Banhart, Bear In Heaven) as well as commercial spots for New York City Ballet, Google, Microsoft, Kiehl's, American Express, and many others. Her first feature, *NORTHERN LIGHT*, was released in the summer of 2014. The film was an official selection of Visions du Réel, Hot Docs, True/False, and BAMcinemaFest, and Critic's Pick in *The Village Voice* and *The New York Times*.

Saela Davis (*Editor/Co-Writer*) is an editor and co-writer for Anna Rose Holmer's feature narrative, *THE FITS* (Venice International Film Festival 2015) for which she attended the Sundance Institute Directors Lab Editing Intensive Fellowship. She most recently edited the vérité documentary *BALLET 422* (Tribeca Film Festival 2014, Magnolia Pictures), which was directed by Jody Lee Lipes. She is currently working on the narrative feature *AMERICANA*, directed by Zachary Shedd. In 2013, she was an additional editor on *NORTHERN LIGHT*, a feature documentary, which was an official selection of Hot Docs, True/False, and BAMcinemaFest. In addition to features, Saela has edited music videos, commercials (Burberry, Canon, Google and others), and short documentaries.

Paul Yee (*Cinematographer*) has lensed the award-winning HBO documentary series *East of Main Street* since its inception in 2010. He is the additional cinematographer for *IT'S ME*, *HILARY: THE MAN WHO DREW ELOISE*, which premiered at Sundance 2015. He has also shot music videos for artists ranging from Aimee Mann to ZZ Top, which have screened at film festivals such as SXSW and the LA Film Festival. Paul has shot short-form documentaries for the Whitney Museum, MOMA, and the New Museum and worked on a variety of commercial projects for clients such as L'Oreal, DIRECTV, Sabra, Barilla, and Clear Channel. Anna Rose Holmer's *THE FITS* is Paul's debut feature film.

Marquicia Jones-Woods (*Associate Producer*) is the Founder and Director of the Q-Kidz Dance Team. Marquicia started the Q-Kidz in 1987 to provide a positive and productive outlet for public housing children living in the West End. Since then, the group has grown to nearly 200 members. In addition to drill competitions, the team regularly performs its original production *Stop The Violence*, a play aimed at fostering dialogue about the impact gun violence on kids. Marquicia also worked with Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority for 25 years as a Property Manager and Resident Council Liaison. In 2011, she was awarded a Congressional

Commendation Award from Congressman Steve Chabot for her impact on the West End community.

Mariah & Chariah Jones (*Choreographers*) are identical twins and have served as the Head Coaches of the Q-Kidz Dance Team since 2010. Under their supervision, the team has competed in over 40 regional and national competitions. Most recently, the team was named the Grand Champions at the *Battle of the Beyoncé*s competition in Memphis, Tennessee. In addition to competition routines, the twins choreographed the Q-Kidz during their appearance on the Lifetime series *Bring It!*, the Findlay Market Cincinnati Reds Opening Day Parade, and the “Big Love” music video for soul singer Jamie Lidell.

Celia Rowison-Hall (*Movement Consultant*) graduated from North Carolina School of the Arts with a BFA in Modern Dance and Choreography. She immediately moved to New York on a fellowship from the Lincoln Center Institute for choreography and also began her career as a professional dancer, earning a prestigious Bessie Award for her performance. She quickly moved into choreographing for film and television, working with directors such as Gaspar Noé and Lena Dunham. She has also choreographed VMA award-winning music videos for bands such as MGMT, Chromeo, and Sleigh Bells and for fashion publications *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Glamour*. Bringing her experience of choreography and performance to the screen, over the past few years Celia has written and directed over fifty short films and videos. These videos have garnered several awards including an Emmy nomination and have been screened at festivals such as SXSW, SFIFF, MFF, Rooftop Films, Glasgow, Dance on Camera at Lincoln Center, and art fairs such as the Armory Show, Performa, and the New Museum. Her feature film debut, *MA*, which she wrote, directed and stars in had its World Premiere at the Venice Film Festival 2015. She was named one of the 25 New Faces of Independent Film by *Filmmaker Magazine*, 2015.

Stenfert Charles (Saunder Stenfert Jurriaans and Daniel Charles Bensi) (*Composers*) are contemporary film composers writing together in New York. They first started playing music together when they formed the unique instrumental rock band Priestbird in 2001. They recorded four acclaimed albums and were invited to tour internationally with many reputable bands including Pearl Jam. In 2010, they were approached to write their first feature movie score for TWO GATES OF SLEEP, which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival. The film demanded a unique minimalist orchestral score and quickly garnered the attention of several directors. Soon after, they were asked to score the critically acclaimed feature MARTHA MARCY MAY MARLENE. From Avant-Garde Classical music to sweeping epic orchestral scores, the composer duo then scored an array of award-winning films and documentaries including SIMON KILLER, THE ONE I LOVE, and Denis Villeneuve’s ENEMY – winning Best Musical Score at the Canadian Screen Awards. Each score they write has its own unique character – laden with vitality and real instruments. Be it small string ensembles, unlikely percussion groups, or a group of clarinets, the duo love to explore innovative textures, demand stark performances, and interweave beautiful spine-chilling melodies. Recently released films include LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT (starring Ewan McGregor), THE BENEFACTOR (starring Richard Gere), THE GIFT (starring Jason Bateman and Joel Edgerton), and the documentary feature THE WOLFPACK. At Sundance 2016 their scores include: CHRISTINE (starring Rebecca Hall), FRANK & LOLA (starring Michael Shannon and Imogen Poots), COMPLETE UNKNOWN (starring Rachel Weiss and Michael Shannon), and THE FITS.

Credits

Oscilloscope Laboratories and
La Biennale di Venezia present
a film by Anna Rose Holmer

THE FITS

Written, Produced & Directed
by Anna Rose Holmer

Story by
Anna Rose Holmer, Saela Davis & Lisa Kjerulff

Produced by
Lisa Kjerulff

Starring
Royalty Hightower as Toni

With

Alexis Neblett as Beezy

Da'Sean Minor as Jermaine

Lauren Gibson as Maia

Makyla Burnam as Legs

Inayah Rodgers as Karisma

Antonio A.B. Grant, Jr. as Donte

And Featuring
The Q-Kidz Dance Team as The Lionesses

Cinematography by
Paul Yee

Production Designer
Charlotte Royer

Edited by
Saela Davis

Associate Producer
Marquicia Jones-Woods

Choreography by
Mariah and Chariah Jones

Movement Consultant
Celia Rowison-Hall

Music by
Danny Bensi and Saunder Jurriaans

Costume Designer
Zachary Sheets

Hair by
Billay Martin

Toni's Hair by
LaDonna Ford

Make-up by
Danielle Mueller

1st Assistant Director
Annalise Lockhart

2nd Assistant Director
Jack Grimmatt

Production Manager
Ryan Sweeney

Script Supervisor
Carlos Zozaya

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