

## **Inspiring Docs: True Stories of Terrific Kid's Competitions**

With movie houses still closed at the time of this writing (April 20, 2020), this reviewer offers readers another selection of recent movies to watch while sequestered at home.

The theme of this month's mini-reviews is "Inspiring Docs," an collection of heart-warming documentary films from the last 20 years that were little seen upon release but will give you a feel-good break from the anguish and grimness of the moment. Even better, they all cover actual kid's competitions, giving you a rooting interest and bolstering our hope for a better world that hath such kids in it. Readers can find these titles on disc (rental or purchase) or on selected streaming services. So, grab your popcorn and try out these stirring flicks.

**Spellbound** (2002) - This is—dare I say—a spell-binding documentary that covers the 1999 National Spelling Bee in Washington, DC, told in mosaic form by following eight finalists from different regions of the country. The kids portrayed are utterly charming in eight different ways, and we learn much about them and their varying family contexts. The last third of the movie concentrates on the final bee at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in downtown DC, where clever editing gives us the built-in drama of the competition, contestant after contestant struggling with their words, their parents agonizing, the never-changing baritone drone of the word reader, as, one after another, the kids slowly drop away. This finale itself contains more true tension than most other "dramatic" films released in recent years.

**Mad Hot Ballroom** (2005) - A sweet and heartening film about a kids' competition, with much of the flavor of "Spellbound" (see above). Here the contest is a city-wide ballroom dancing challenge among fifth-graders in the New York City public schools. The girls are uniformly sweet and eager to learn and compete, while the boys are somewhat embarrassed and reluctant to participate. It is their teachers and instructors which are the inspiration—patiently guiding their novice charges into learning a range of dances, from ballroom to tango. It all leads up to the big finale dance-off in a Manhattan park. This is a performance in which you end up rooting for everybody!

**The Heart of the Game** (2005) - An inspirational story set in the world of girls' high school basketball. Darnellia Russell is a gifted player from the poor part of Seattle who elects to play at middle class Roosevelt High under the tutelage of firebrand coach Bill Resler. The two's journey takes them through racial sensitivities, hard work, and tough decisions (young Russell leaves school at one

point to have a child) only to lead up to a Washington state girls' basketball championship. These two contrasting figures become part of an unpretentious epic that took director Ward Serrill seven years to make and which ends in a thrilling fairy tale finish.

**War/Dance** (2007) - A moving documentary which shows the transformation of a group of poor, war-damaged Ugandan orphans, having suffered a ghastly fate in an East African conflict, into a joyous music and dance team ready to compete in a national music festival. The film, made by documentarians Sean Fine and Andrea Nix, focuses on several individual Ugandan kids—all charmers and each with a story more heartbreaking than the last—who live in a northern refugee camp where they are given training in traditional African music and dance. They then travel to the country's capital, Kampala, to compete in the National Music Festival. A heart-stirrer.

**Step** (2017) - A compelling true story about an African-American step-dancing troupe in a small private school in Baltimore. The film highlights three senior girls who look to “step” for learning discipline and teamwork and to foster creativity and camaraderie—all of which they achieve. Just as important to their success (all three, of modest means, go on to higher education) are their step teacher, their academic counselor, and their varied families. You ache for them when they encounter obstacles then root for them as they gear up for a major step dance competition. Not to mention the vigor and pulse of the dancing itself: a stomping jamboree!

**Science Fair** (2018) - A wonderful true-life *Revenge of the Nerds*. The film follows nine high school students from around the world as they compete in an international science competition, an annual event that attracts some 1,700 of the brightest (and quirkiest) teenage scholars. The kids the filmmakers highlight are a varied and fascinating batch, from a lively math genius from West Virginia through a self-effacing Muslim girl from South Dakota to a lanky German trying to revive single-wing aircraft. Co-directors and co-writers of “Science Fair,” Cristina Costantini and Darren Foster, have pulled off a true winner in their first documentary feature.

And for something completely different but just as moving, let's take a look at another documentary which has the same kick from the other end of life.

**Young @ Heart** (2007) - A buoyant and upbeat motion picture depicting the “Young at Heart Chorus” from Northampton, Massachusetts, told through several key members of the group—whose average age is 81--and their dedicated music director Bob Climan. This seniors group is hardly stodgy but rather specializes in up-tempo pop standards— even some hip-hop—and performs for delighted

audiences anywhere from prisons to packed auditoria. As American as this story is, it took a couple of Brits, Stephen Walker and Sally George, to get it made. Much more than a movie simply about “cute old people” (although many of those are featured), it highlights how the human spirit can be uplifted through song and community.

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