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'Polka Dot Alley' a behind-the-scene look at Fiesta dancers

By SCOTT STEEPLTON, NEWS-PRESS CITY EDITOR
 May 16, 2015 12:02 AM

Not since its inception had Old Spanish Days seen controversy like that surrounding the 2012 Junior Spirit contest, when Sadee Broida, who won the audition, was forced to share the title with another girl, Jesalyn McCollum, because of an organizers' snafu.

The drama of the time and the way the girls handle it, and indeed grow because of it, is the focus of one installment of "Polka Dot Alley: A Flamenco Dance Trilogy" that starts a three-day run today at The New Vic in Santa Barbara.

Made by filmmakers and flamenco fans Christine Mallet and her husband, Randal Kazarian, of Windless Chimes Productions, the documentary tells "three stories of five young dancers driven by zealous parents, famed instructors and an Old Spanish Days Fiesta schedule of auditions, rehearsals and performances."

Shooting in high-definition, going tight on faces instead of settling for long shots so often used in dance films, and jumping from rehearsal to performance and back result in a beautifully styled work befitting of the wonder that is this annual celebration of Spanish and Mexican heritage.

The filmmakers started production in 2009 intending to focus on the cream of the crop: those young women going for the title of Spirit of Fiesta.

"And then all hell broke out," Ms. Mallet told the News-Press, a reference to Part 3, "Struggles and Transformation." This is

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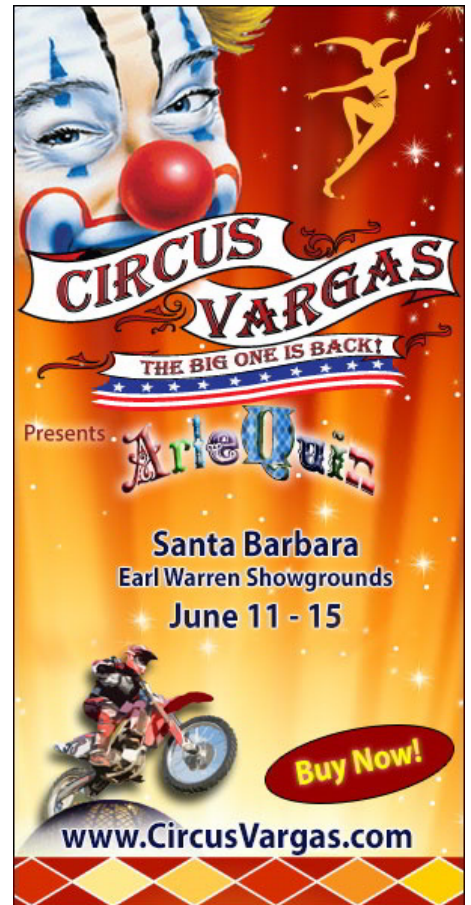


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Sadee Broida, top photo, and Jesalyn McCollum, below, shared the stage as 2012 co-Junior Spirits, a story told as it happens in one installment of "Polka Dot Alley: A Flamenco Dance Trilogy."

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where the judges' heartbreaking decision about who would dance throughout Old Spanish Days as Junior Spirit ñ the little sister to Spirit - was made worse when it was discovered, after the selection process began, that two of the girls might not meet the qualifications.

One dropped out, but Ojai resident Sadee danced her way to the win.

Or so she thought.

Faced with the possibility of stripping the talented dancer of her title, organizers instead decided to let Sadee and second-year-in-a-row runner-up Jesalyn share the honors.

It was clear that the real story was the girls learning their way as opposed to those who'd already found it.

"Part 3 is probably my favorite," said Ms. Mallet. Not only does the dance evolve, but the audience sees how the dance schools turn young kids who like to dance into performers.

Much of the production focuses on Linda Vega Dance Studio and the documentary's name is a nod to the transformation of the approach to the Vega studio during Old Spanish Days.

"There's a long alleyway that goes past the front houses to the back," said Mr. Kazarian. "During Fiesta, it's full of girls in polka dot dresses."

"There's no street sign yet, but Linda's threatening to get one."

"Polka Dot Alley" started out as one film, but once editing began, it became clear "three would be better," said Mr. Kazarian. "There were three very different stories because of the girls."

Each runs about 1 hour 40 minutes.

Part 1, "Dreams and Dedication," focuses on 11-year-old Talia, 2009 Junior Spirit of Fiesta, "a young yet experienced performer who becomes a role model to Santa Barbara's up-and-coming younger dancers: Anais, Jesalyn, Olivia and Talia's younger sister, Tatum, all striving for the 2010 title."

Part 2 is "Hopes and Determination," which shows 11-year-old Anais "carrying on a strong family tradition by winning the coveted Junior Spirit of Fiesta title, just as her mother did 40 years earlier."

Will she be passing the sash to her friend and Junior Spirit runner-up Jesalyn?

As for Part 3, Sadee, now 15 and attending Nordhoff High School in Ojai, told the News-Press, "I really enjoyed the documentary. It really takes you behind the scenes of Fiesta and shows everything that we go through, how much practice time we put in. It's a really good documentary and I really hope everyone sees it."

Having the girls share the title that year divided Santa Barbara, and the film does not shy away from noting the vitriol.

"It left out some really loving parts," said Sadee. "It showed all the harsh comments, but there was a lot of love."

If you think the experience soured her to Fiesta, just wait couple years.

"I'm taking a break from dancing right now," said Sadee, "but I will be trying out for Spirit with Linda Vega when I go to Santa Barbara City College."

Said her mother, Leticia: "It's a very complementary documentary and I'm really



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happy about that. It's interesting to see the whole story unfold."

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FYI

"Polka Dot Alley" screens today , Sunday and May 24 at the New Vic, 33 W. Victoria St., Santa Barbara. Part 1 is at 3 p.m., Part 2 at 5:30 and Part 3 at 8 each day. Tickets are \$10-\$12. For tickets, call 965-5400 or go to <https://tickets.ensembletheatre.com>.

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