

# Cultural Daily

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## Movement speaks louder in *The Fits*

Sarah Elgart · Thursday, June 9th, 2016

Inside the strange and beautiful universe created in Anne Rose Holmer's breakout feature film **The Fits**, dialogue is largely absent, and movement, singular visual imagery, and the powerful screen grabbing presence of its young star Royalty Hightower speak much louder than words ever could. The story follows a tomboyish young girl, eleven-year-old Toni, who trains daily in boxing at a Cincinnati after school gymnasium with her older brother Jermaine. She is fit, fierce, and distinctly driven as we see her practicing pull-ups, push-ups, and boxing moves alongside brother with serious and admirable commitment, dutifully staying late to help Jermaine with his gym chores. But Toni's focus strays when bewitched by the mysterious sisterhood of the local dance/drill team The Lionesses, who also practice at the gym. And when one by one, members of The Lionesses are overcome with strange and seemingly uncontrollable episodes of epileptic like seizures, the "fits", we soon understand that for Toni, much deeper forces than dance versus boxing are at play.



Toni trains in *THE FITS*

The covenant of The Lionesses is made up by a group of some thirty or so girls who appear to range in age from ten/eleven up to eighteen. The older Lionesses, who lead and create the choreographic challenges, often performed in call and answer form, are budding in their sexuality. We see them spend time in front of mirrors applying make up, or talking about and admiring the young stud boxers who train alongside them in the gym, Jermaine amongst them. While befriended by a much younger and very playful girl on the team named Beezy, Toni, who is poised on the cusp between childhood and adolescence, studies and is fascinated by both the Lionesses' moves and their self-assurance. She joins the group and trains hard, but along the way she questions how much of her individuality she may have to sacrifice, and how far she is willing to go to fit in.

**The Fits** is no ordinary film in which dance is only an adjunct part of a plot, served up for entertainment, or to underline pivotal dramatic moments that display the trajectory of a main character's emotional development, relationships, and/or career aspirations. Most of these elements are present and dance is used to deal with them, yes, but there is so much more, and dance is respected beautifully not just as a character element but as a unique and powerful cinematic art form.



The Lionesses practicing in *THE FITS*

What sets it apart is that **The Fits** uses dance as an integral element to the form, structure, and context of the entire film. It is the backdrop and backbone of the plot, the embodiment of the main character's aspirations and personal growth, and a central part of the language and lexicon of the

film itself. Movement and dance, especially in the hands of Ann Rose Holmer's astutely sensitive and instinctive directing and Royalty's acting, is in fact a replacement for traditional dialogue. The choreography they practice mixes routine punches, shrugs, and jumps with head spins, kicks, and mundane quotidian, human gestures. And the "fits" themselves are so reminiscent of the dance team's usual choreography that the girls who are seized by them go almost unnoticed at first by fellow Lionesses amongst whom they unfold.

I had the pleasure of speaking briefly with director Anna Rose Holmer, and rather than ask her about the noteworthy points of the film: the fact that she and the producers collaborated with the Queen City Boxing Club and the Q-Kidz Dance Team to cast reel teens from Cincinnati's West End, that they worked with one of the Dance Team's choreographers, that they used that location and immersed themselves entirely into the community to procure the performances and feel of the film, I wanted to focus on her use of dance.



Toni rests and reflects after training

SE: Can you please comment on why dance, what your interest in it is, your use of it as a language, and how you arrived at it as such an integral part of the film?

ARH: *We really see this as a dance film. What we're doing is taking all the emotional narrative and placing it into the body of her emotional character. How she carries herself, what that says about her emotional space and her character, and how she moves through the world.*

SE: I loved and was so struck by the fact that the actual "fits" that seem to descend on the girls is so similar choreographically to the language of dance as used by The Lionesses in their drill team... It seemed to me to work almost as an abstraction of it. Can you comment?

ARH: *We worked with three choreographers on the film, two identical twin choreographers, Mariah and Chariah Jones, and filmmaker and dancer Celia Roston Hall. I had conversations with all three of them that included how to break down the movement so they would reference the drill team as well as the boxing. They were borrowing a lot of the lexicon from drill and abstracting it.*

SE: I would almost argue that there are two main characters, Toni and the dance itself, and that dance is both a protagonist and a villain. Any thoughts or comments on this as a concept?

ARH: *There is this push & pull I terms of choreography and Toni's fear is that she has to step in line... That its just about precision and execution. Her adolescent view is that it's just about choreography. Her relationship to Beezy though is about finding freedom and play, and how important play is in dance. Through play you're able to have discovery.*

*Really (for Toni's character) it was about the power of release and dance as release, and about giving into this other element of performance that is more subconscious... Not about memorizing choreography but about giving up control and letting go.*

SE: Is the use of the term "The Fits" about the idea of fitting in?

ARH: *Being fit and fitting into your own body is what its about. There are so many ways that "The Fits" is a play on words. When I think about fits I think about uncontrolled laughter and bursts of uncontrolled expression.*



Toni and brother Jermaine train in THE FITS

By allowing movement to replace traditional, expository dialogue and become at once form, structure, and a language all its own in **The Fits**, Anna Rose Holmer generously, and gracefully hands the film over to viewer to interpret and internalize as they wish. In today's landscape of predictable, hit the viewer over the head melodramatic fare, this kind of filmmaking stands out as daring and gracious, and a great vote of confidence in the sentient ability and intelligence of the viewer.

Says Ann Rose Holmer about the absence of dialogue in **The Fits**: *Often times dialogue is reductive... It limits what we can say, whereas I feel movement is very open and expansive in terms of what it is allowed to say. And cinema is a perfect art form to explore bodies in motion.*

**The Fits** is a stunning and mercurial piece of work about adolescence and identify. It breaks new ground in the genre of dance films and filmmaking in general, elevating the status of dance and movement beyond mere entertainment, identifying them as powerful and communicative forces that can replace the limitations of words.

*Go!*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfHnykLOjH4>

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