



Photo courtesy of Kelly J. Richardson.

FILM

Platini Queiroz gets ready for the show.

Life on the Tightrope

by Débora Silva

The year is 2008 and the scenario a violent slum controlled by drug gangs in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. A big-top circus tent is set in an abandoned parking lot in Praça Onze, a district in the heart of Rio. Inside the tent, children and young adults participate in a project called Circo Social (Social Circus). They learn the art of the trapeze, acrobatics, juggling, and contortionism as an alternative to the violent and crime-ridden life outside the tent. For these aspiring performers, life is a struggle. Their homes are unstable, and most people in their community — themselves included — have dropped out of school. The circus project is perhaps the best thing they have ever experienced in their lives.

This story might be perceived as just another social project designed for residents of at-risk communities in a third-world country. The young Bay Area filmmaker and UC Berkeley alumna Kelly J. Richardson, however, saw the situation as a unique opportunity to produce a compelling documentary.

Richardson reflected on her time at Berkeley during the CLAS screening of her film “Without A Net,” recalling

the classes she took in Latin American Studies, Spanish, Portuguese, Theater, Dance, and Journalism. “I think I had the inspiration to become a storyteller,” she said.

According to Richardson, the idea of producing “Without A Net” — a documentary that depicts the experiences of a group of young circus performers — was conceived because of the “deep personal connection” she has with performance art. After years of physical training in gymnastics, dance, and theater, Richardson travelled to Salvador, Brazil in 2006, to join a summer circus program. While in Salvador, she heard about the Social Circus project, which was designed for at-risk children and teenagers living in poverty. The project provided the participants with teachers, a space to practice, and opportunities to perform. After learning more about the program, Richardson started interacting directly with the student-performers and gradually became empathetic to their plight.

“I got to know them as people and as fellow performers and watched their shows. I thought they were really interesting people, with fascinating stories to tell,” she said.

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"I started thinking those stories would work well in film, and the footage would be really bright, really interesting and exciting to watch. I thought that the combination of factors would make a very good film."

The stories she heard — tales about the youngsters' brushes with the law and association with drug gangs, memories of incarcerated or murdered siblings, and their challenges to get enough to eat each day — were worth documenting, she decided.

"I was interested in the concept, the whole idea of using circus as a tool for social change," said Richardson. "But more importantly, when I heard the stories of what it was like to grow up in the slums, where there is a lot of risk in just getting to the end of the day, but with the excitement of finding a way to get through these situations, I saw a resemblance between the way the people live their day-to-day lives and the way they were performing in the circus."

Compelled to produce the documentary, Richardson returned to the United States at the end of 2006 and applied to the Fulbright Foundation for support. After being awarded the scholarship, Richardson's hard work really began: although she was familiar with Brazil and knowledgeable

about the performing arts and journalism, she had no formal training in documentary film production. "I had one whole year from the time that I was informed about the scholarship until the time I began to film to learn as much as I could about filmmaking," she said.

Once her project was funded, Richardson returned to Brazil in 2007 to carefully explore the concept behind the Social Circus. Knowing there were several similar projects throughout Brazil, she decided to visit a few of them. She ended up in Rio de Janeiro, where she was fascinated not only by the life stories of the performers but also by the complexity of Rio as a city.

"It is such a rich, cultural place, and the personalities there are so vibrant. Rio is full of extreme contrasts. There is this huge wealth in direct contrast with extreme poverty," Richardson said. "And the people I met in the circus were full of life, so enthusiastic, really good characters. Exactly what you want to find in a documentary."

The filmmaker spent a year in Rio de Janeiro in an effort to build trust with the subjects of her documentary. During the process, she developed a special connection with four performers — the illiterate



Photo courtesy of Kelly J. Richardson.

The performers practice.

trapeze-student Djeferson; the teenagers Bárbara, an acrobat, and Rayana, a contortionist; and the nine-year-old performer, Platini — who later became the main characters in “Without A Net.”

In addition to finding the ideal location and the perfect characters for her documentary, Richardson, who had never dealt with a camera before, had to attend a variety of film classes and learn a multitude of techniques in less than a year. She took classes at the Film Arts Foundation (before it merged with the San Francisco Film Society), the Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC), UC Berkeley, and Berkeley City College.

“I was really lucky to have had such a great offering of classes, video production, storyboarding, editing. I had access to equipment and had an excellent adviser, John Antonelli. He became my mentor and gave me advice in filmmaking techniques.”

Armed with some essential knowledge of the filmmaking process, a Panasonic HVX200 camera, and funds from her Fulbright scholarship, Richardson returned to Rio de Janeiro in 2008 and spent the next 10 months filming “Without A Net.” The result of her work is a 60-minute documentary that portrays the lives

of the central quartet — Djeferson, Bárbara, Rayana, and Platini. Like many participants in the Social Circus project, these performers strive to gain more expertise each day, despite the harsh circumstances in the slums where they live. Inside the circus tent, in the abandoned parking lot of Praça Onze, they learn a variety of skills with the goal of winning a spot in the end-of-year show. In preparation for the curtain rising on opening night, they rehearse relentlessly, often ignoring the physical risks that are inherent in trapeze and contortion. “Without A Net” is a documentary that carefully examines the connections between risk, desire, poverty, and circus, said Richardson.

“There are many benefits in circus training, physical benefits, like in many sports,” she said, in an effort to explain the complexity of her documentary’s central theme. “However, there are risks, many possibilities that people can be injured. But this is the thing that these performers want the most. It is their only option. Like Bárbara says, ‘Doing circus is very good, cool, and gratifying. It’s just that if we thought about the risks, we’d never do it.’”

The complexity of the circus also inspired the young filmmaker to come up with a suitable name for her documentary. The title “Without A Net” emerged in Richardson’s mind once she reflected upon the similarities between circus and real life. Both offer excitement, but they can also be full of risks.

“The idea of being on a tightrope or on the trapeze, when someone has to catch you, you really have to trust,” said Richardson, explaining the connection between circus and life. “These performers’ lives are so precarious. They don’t have a back-up plan if something doesn’t work out. They don’t have the security of money if their career doesn’t work out... They are without a net.”

Richardson’s debut documentary made its Bay Area premiere at the Mill Valley Festival in the beginning of October, after an Oscar-qualifying screening in New York and Los Angeles. The film was also presented during San Francisco’s Documentary Festival in November. Currently, the 30-year-old filmmaker keeps herself busy exploring her next film project while improving her circus skills in studios throughout the Bay Area. But if anyone ever questions whether she is a performer or a filmmaker, Richardson does not hesitate to answer:

“I’m a filmmaker with a circus past, and I continue to practice circus because I love it.”

Kelly J. Richardson is the director of “Without A Net.” She spoke for CLAS on October 23, 2012.

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