



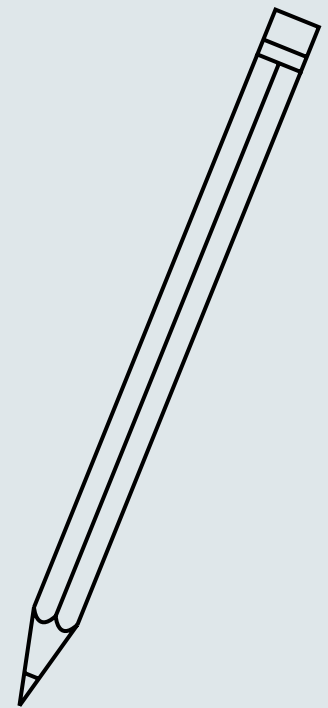
# Cuban Dancer

## STUDY GUIDE

Content written by **Maddy Leonard**.

Designed by **Ankoor Patel**, **Camille Gwise** and **Keith Zwolfer**

All SFFILM Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFILM Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.



More info at [sffilm.org/education](https://sffilm.org/education)

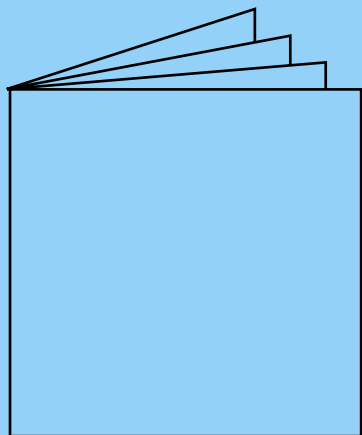






# Index

02	Teaching the Film
02	About the Film
03	Director's Bio/Statement
04	Discussion Questions
06	Activities
08	California Media Literacy Resources
08	Common Core Standards
09	Media Literacy Resources
10	Documentary Filmmaking Guide





## About the Film

Alexis is a 15 year old talented and proud student of the National Ballet School of Cuba. He spends his life practicing chassé and entrechats with his girlfriend and dance partner Yelenia. However, when his parents move to Florida to be reunited with his sister, his happy teenage world is turned upside down. He's forced to leave behind Cuba, his colleagues at school, his relatives and his beloved girlfriend.

Facing rejection and homesick for his native Cuba, Alexis feels lost and alone. When he gets accepted to the prestigious Harid Ballet school he has to start all over. He doesn't speak the language, has no friends and his Cuban style of ballet does not match the American school method. Meanwhile, his parents are making sacrifices for his career working extra hours at their humble jobs. Alexis knows that he has to find his way quickly in the bourgeois and elitist world of American ballet while trying to remain faithful to his roots.

DIRECTOR  
**Roberto Salinas**

(Italy, Canada, Chile 2020)  
English, 95 mins

## Teaching the Film

Watch **Cuban Dancer** and join us for a fun and educational Q&A to learn about the making of this visually stunning and moving coming of age story. The star of the documentary, Alexis Valdes, will be joining us virtually to talk about the process that went into making this film, and will answer questions from the audience.

Taught in conjunction with this guide, the film will encourage students to learn about Cuban culture and dance, while also developing their social emotional skills, and broadening their understanding of what it means to be an immigrant in the US. This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators and families alike. Please feel free to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet your unique learning objectives and circumstances.

**Recommended for Grades 6-12**

## Subject Areas

- **Dance**
- **Peer/Youth Issues**
- **Social Emotional Learning**
- **Spanish Language**
- **Visual Arts/Media**



## Director's Bio

**Roberto Salinas** is a director, producer, screenwriter, and director of photography. His previously directed documentary **The Troublemaker, Behind the Scenes of the United Nations** was co-produced by Italian GA&A productions and New York based Sirk Productions and developed with the support of the MEDIA program of the European Union. It premiered at the 36th Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano, La Habana, Cuba and was official selection of the 16th

## Director's Statement

If dance is the secret language of the soul, Cuban dance reveals the feeling of a people in constant dialectic with their own identity. Being Cuban means to live an irremediable conflict: the visceral love for the island and the need for many to abandon it. The despedida, the farewell, is a daily affair in Cuba. Cuban art is nourished by the poetics of farewell. For Alexis, the experience of farewell came at the age of fifteen. Farewell to his first love and to that Cuban method of ballet proudly taken as a moral guide.

A short distance away, in Florida, where Alexis's artistic and sentimental education continued, people grow up and dance differently. The chaotic urban life of Havana is replaced by the placid order of the "gated communities"; the indoctrination of the National Ballet School of Cuba by the liberal model of the HARID Conservatory in Boca Raton.

Nevertheless, these seemingly antithetical worlds complement and need each other. On their capacity for dialogue depends the path of integration of many young Latinos, like Alexis, who expect respect for their identity as well as economic opportunities. For their parents, perhaps it is too late to escape the ghetto of Miami's Latino community and an integration that often tastes of exploitation. Alexis and his companions are beyond these stereotypes. For them, it's just background noise. In the hall where the rehearsal is taking place there is only dance.



# Discussion Questions

## PRE-VIEWING TOPICS

Cuban Dancer brings together visual arts, social emotional learning, and topics around immigration. This visually stunning film does an extraordinary job of humanizing the complexity of immigration and the tolls it can have on individuals and families. It uses the art of cinema to intimately connect the viewer to Alexis, a bright young ballet dancer who loves to dream big.

You might choose to prepare students for the film by discussing some of the following topics with them before viewing.

Assess what your students know about the history of relations between the US and Cuba. It might be helpful for you to share some of the below resources with them and facilitate a discussion about the history of relations between the two countries so that students can understand the significance of Alexis's families immigration from Cuba to the US.

Watch [A brief history of America and Cuba produced](#) by Vox Media.

Read [an interview with Renata Keller](#), a historian who spent nine months researching Cuba's relationship with Mexico and the United States during the Cold War, about the announcement that the U.S. and Cuba will begin to normalize relations.

Read this [2014 NY Times Article](#) about the United States' restoration of full diplomatic relations with Cuba under the Obama administration.

Compare that article to this [2017 NY Times Article](#), that spells out the changes Trump made to those diplomatic relations during his presidency.

[Short film](#) that highlights Cuban culture

## POST-VIEWING TOPICS

### Characters, Themes, and Story

1. What are the major themes of the film? What story or stories is the filmmaker trying to tell?
2. If you could summarize the plot of Cuban Dancer in 2-3 sentences, how would you describe it?
3. How was Alexis different at the beginning, middle and end of the film? How did he change as a person? What did he learn? How did he grow?
4. How did Alexis's relationship with his family change as the movie went on? What effect did immigrating to the US have on Alexis? On his parents? On his friends and family back in Cuba?

## CUBAN CULTURE

Cuba has a rich culture that is an amalgamation of Indigenous Taíno, African, and Spanish influences, with its most prominent aspects being its music, dance, art, spirituality, and agro-ecological farming and forestry techniques rooted in Taíno tradition.

Over the past thirty years, a diverse Taíno movement has taken form in Cuba, bringing to light the ways in which the

Native people of Cuba have shaped the country's culture pre and post colonization. This movement challenges the prevalent belief that Native peoples became extinct shortly after European colonization in the Greater Antilles. It is spurring a regeneration of Indigenous identity within the racially mixed and culturally blended society.

Cuban art is heavily influenced by the country's post-colonization, revolutionary history. Its music is known all over the world for its lively and exciting pulsating rhythms driving many to their feet. Cuban music encompasses a great deal of percussion – which is a direct reference to the country's African heritage

– and several types of string instruments including the guitar. Cuban music has also been the basis for other genres including salsa, jazz, and the tango.

Today, Cuba is one of the few remaining communist nations in the world. While its economy and infrastructure are in major need of repair – partially due to years of US trade restrictions and interference – it has some of the best universal social, education, and health systems in the world.

### Sources:

1. [American Indian Magazine article](#) written by José Barreiro
2. [Black History Month UK](#)
3. [iexplore.com](#)
4. [Smithsonian National Museum of the American](#)



## Discussion Questions (Cont.)

“

Seminal world events become the backdrop to Alexis's 'coming of age,' such as President Obama's visit to Cuba, the Rolling Stones' free concert in Havana, the election of Donald Trump and the death of Fidel Castro. These historical events reflect directly on the daily life of Alexis and his family, while establishing a timeline of the radical changes occurring for Cubans on the island and abroad.

### Filmmaking Style

How did the filmmaker use movement and dance to move the story forward?

In the film, Alexis was shown dancing in several different contexts. He was shown practicing at his schools, and performing on stages, but there were also moments where the filmmaker decided to include more intimate choreographed dances either with Alexis alone or with his girlfriend. (You can find examples of this at 17:00, 27:50, 43:20, 54:30, 1:21:20 and 1:32:00). These choreographed dances seemed to be a way for Alexis to express how he was feeling at that moment in time. Did these choreographed dances stick out to you? Did they connect you to Alexis emotionally? Would the film be as emotionally compelling without these choreographed dance scenes? Why or why not?

This film is shot with lots of beautiful colors and a wide variety of shot types. Did the cinematic style of the film add to the emotion of the film? Were there any scenes that stuck out to you as especially meaningful or powerful?

How did the filmmaker use news footage to establish the context of the family's move to the US? Without the news footage establishing the setting of the film, would you have thought differently about their move?

Roberto Salinas, the director of Cuban Dancer, followed Alexis and his family on and off for five years. What do you think it would be like to have a documentary

crew be part of your life for five whole years? What do you think are the pros and cons of being a filmmaker who establishes a long term relationship with a film subject?

In a [2020 interview](#), Roberto Salinas, says that the film started as a documentary about the Cuban dance school that Alexis was attending, but after they started filming the students, they decided to focus the film around one student, to achieve a more intimate feeling. This led to a huge shift in the plot of the film, making it more about a young man's coming of age story. What does this tell you about the flexibility of the documentary filmmaking process? How would the film have been different if they stayed on their original path?

What do you think the most difficult part of the immigration process was for Alexis? Did you see a shift in his personality after he arrived in the US?

Do you think the family's expectations of the US were met? What challenges did they face in the US after immigrating?

What was different about Alexis's dance experience in Cuba vs. in the US? Do you think it was hard for him to learn a new style of Ballet and learn a new language all at once? Have you ever had an experience where you've been forced to learn a new skill like this? If yes, how did you do it? Do you have any advice you would have given Alexis?



# Activities

“

There's a chance they will ask me to say I'm not Cuban. It might be embarrassing for some companies and they might ask me to say I'm from the USA and not from Cuba. I might have to do it for professional purposes. I have to become an excellent dancer. Because then, I will be free to say I am a Cuban dancer, but I also dance here.

- Alexis Valdés

## Read and Share Immigrant Stories

[Immigrant Stories](#) is a research and archiving project run by the Immigration History Research Center (IHRC) at the University of Minnesota. Immigrant Stories helps immigrants, refugees, and their family members create digital stories. The IHRC Archives, is North America's largest archive of immigrant life. The IHRC Archives will professionally preserve all Immigrant Stories, ensuring that students, researchers, and the public will be able to watch these videos decades from now.

Here is a list of Immigrant Stories selected for the classroom. Ask students to browse the stories either in a small group or on their own. Tell them to choose a story that sticks out to them and watch the video made about that story.

Note: It is important while having conversations about sensitive topics like immigration and cultural diversity, that you establish expectations with students ahead of time. Make sure students understand how to respectfully approach these topics and be sure to create an environment where students feel comfortable having open and honest conversations. Be cognizant that you may unknowingly have documented or undocumented students and/or students who have documented or undocumented immigrants in their family. All students should feel comfortable to share their stories if they want to, but should not be forced to relate this activity to themselves personally if it makes them uncomfortable. No one's immigration status should be "outed" without their consent.

After students have all found a video that they resonate with, have a class or small group discussion about the chosen stories. Here are some questions you might prompt students with:

1. Can you summarize what your Immigrant Story was about?
2. What about the story sparked your interest?
3. Did you have any personal connection to the story?
4. Did you learn anything about a culture that is different from yours while watching the film?
5. Did you learn anything about the process of immigrating to the US by watching the film?

## Watch "When Everything Was Everything"

Watch Saymoukda Vongsay perform this [spoken word poem](#), and then listen to her explain the story behind the poem in her [Immigrant Story](#). Discuss and analyze the poem with the class. Here are some [helpful resources on analyzing poetry](#).

**Culture** is a 'set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures, and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behavior and their interpretations of the meaning of other people's behavior.' In other words, culture is the shared knowledge, experience, beliefs, attitudes, values, patterns of behavior, and interactions among a relatively large group of people. Culture is used to form the common ground for communication among members of a group and is transmitted from one generation to the next.

**Identity** is 'the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is. In other words, identity is not only the inner character of a person but also the place they feel they occupy within society.'

**Culture and Identity** are related. A person's culture contributes to how they see themselves and the groups with which they identify. A person's understanding of their own identity and the identity of others is shaped by the values and attitudes that are prevalent at home and in the surrounding community. People engage with the cultures they encounter to construct an identity that relates to those cultures in a variety of ways, from seeking similarities to emphasizing differences.

Source: [Teaching Immigration with the Immigrant Stories Project](#)





# Activities (Cont.)

## Discuss Culture and Identity

Define culture and identity with your class, and have an open discussion of how the terms relate to each other. Use the questions below to discuss how culture and identity play out in Cuban Dancer.

1. How did Cuban culture affect Alexis's identity? What happened to his identity when he was thrown into a very different culture in the US?
2. What might be some of the challenges of navigating multiple cultures as an immigrant? How was Alexis navigating these challenges in the film? What did he find most difficult about navigating a new culture?
3. How might growing up as an immigrant or a child of immigrants influence how people view their identity? Do you think Alexis's identity shifted throughout the film because he immigrated to the US? How so?
4. Art and dance are both part of what makes up a culture. When Alexis arrived in the US he had to learn a whole new cultural style of ballet. How did he cope with this? What do you think he struggled with the most? How did he eventually overcome this?

You can also use this discussion as a space for students to self reflect about their own culture and identity. Here are some questions you can ask them to answer as a class, in groups, or on paper.

1. What are the different cultures that you navigate?
2. Think broadly about the different behaviors, symbols, language, etc. that you use in different settings; for instance, at home or at school, on a sports team or in a job, with family or with friends. What would you consider a symbol of a culture that is important to you?
3. How do you balance different people's expectations of your behavior and values?
4. How does your identity relate to the different cultures you navigate? Have those cultures shaped your identity in any specific ways?
5. Do you ever experience conflict between your identity and culture?
6. Do you ever experience external conflict with others because of your identity or culture? If so, how do you cope with that? Do you have a support system you can go to when you experience this conflict?

## The History & Culture of Cuban Ballet

No technique of ballet is the "original"; rather, all surged out of others' existence. Born in Italy, raised in France and Denmark, cultivated in Russia and refined in England and the Americas, ballet is nothing if not an international art form. As such, over the course of more than 300 years, several methods have diverged from a common classical vocabulary.

The creation of the Cuban method of ballet dates back to the 1930s. It has its origins in the Russian Vaganova method, which emphasizes dancing with the entire body. This results in harmonious movement between arms, legs and torso. As with other methods of ballet, in the Cuban method the torso is the very foundation of all movement, so the dancer's torso is trained to be strong and well aligned. Movements are then achieved through control of the very core, producing action which is very clean and precise but not rigid. However, the Cuban method diverges from other methods in that it has a romantic feel that also combines high Russian extensions and jumps with intricate Italian foot work, French arm artistry, and British attention to detail.

In the Cuban method, communication between the couple is enhanced, so that the art of ballet is heightened through expression and drama. Unison and harmony of the couple is achieved through a true connection, through the eyes, the entire face, the arms and the hands. All aspects of the Cuban method, the physical, emotional and spiritual, fuse to create a style of ballet which is like no other.

The Cuban method has changed the face of ballet with its superb technique and impeccable foot work. It is organic, extraverted, and highly expressive. It is a style and artistry which truly incorporates the aesthetic tastes and roots of Cuban culture within its very structure. Cuban trained dancers and students of the Cuban method are now sought throughout the world and achieve marquee status with prominent ballet companies internationally.

Source: [The Alma Dance School](http://TheAlmaDanceSchool.com)



# California Media Literacy Standards

According to the [California Department of Education](#), Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and use media and to encompasses the foundational skills that lead to digital citizenship.

Digital citizenship is a diverse set of skills related to current technology and social media, including the norms of appropriate, responsible, and healthy behavior.

These literacies closely relate to information literacy: the ability to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.

California is now offering, at no cost to local schools, districts, or students, three online databases for use by every K–12 school and student in the state, with access starting at the beginning of the 2018–19 school year.

Online content from [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#), [ProQuest](#), and [TeachingBooks.net](#) will be available individually to all K–12 students in California, as well as all public schools in the state.

The following resources are ready-made curricula, usually consisting of scope and sequence learning outcomes and activities, for media and information literacy as well as digital citizenship:

1. [California MSLS](#)—K–12 information literacy outcomes.
2. [Assignment: Media Literacy](#)—K–12 history-social science, language arts, and health curricula to teach media literacy as a critical consumer.
3. [Critical Media Project](#)—High school media literacy video-based curriculum focusing on topics like age, class, disability, gender, race/ethnicity, religion, etc.
4. [International Society for Technology in Education Technology Standards](#)—Kindergarten through adult digital literacy outcomes.
5. [Common Sense Media](#)—K–12 digital citizenship curriculum, including PD

6. [Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District Digital Citizenship](#)—K–12 digital citizenship curriculum based on Common Sense Media.
7. [Teaching Tolerance Digital and Civic Literacy Skills](#)—K–12 specific history-social science digital citizenship framework with lessons.
8. [Be Internet Citizens](#)—High school digital citizenship curriculum.
9. [MediaWise: Navigating Digital Information](#)—Subject-neutral middle and high school 10-part video series by John Green

Find more media literacy resources on the [California Department of Education](#) website.

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-12.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-12.3
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-12.4
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-12.5
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-12.4
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-12.7



# Media Literacy Resources: Screening with Meaning

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive. Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

1. **Medium:** the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
2. **Author:** the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
3. **Content:** the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
4. **Audience:** the target audience to whom it is delivered
5. **Purpose:** the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS

### MEDIUM

#### All Media Is Constructed.

- What is the message, how is it delivered and in what format?
- What technologies are used to present the message?
- What visual and auditory elements comprise the media content?
- What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format?

### AUTHOR

#### All Media Is Constructed by Someone.

- Who is delivering the message?
- Who originally constructed the message?
- What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?

### CONTENT

#### Media Is A Language For Information.

- What is the subject of the media message?
- What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?
- What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response?
- To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?

### AUDIENCE

#### All Media Messages Reach an Audience.

- Who receives the message?
- For whom is the message intended?
- What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?
- What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?
- How might others perceive this message differently? Why?

### PURPOSE

#### All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.

- Why was the message constructed?
- Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?
- To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?
- What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?



# Documentary Filmmaking

A documentary is a film that has a goal to capture truth, fact, or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. There are many kinds of documentaries, and obviously not everyone's idea of truth is the same.

The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational cinema vérité filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary.

Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism. Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience.

Most documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis:

1. Who made the film?
2. Who funded the film?
3. Why was the film produced?
4. What is the intended audience?

The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DOCUMENTARY

**1895** The Lumiere brothers develop the first motion picture film reel, capturing brief unedited clips of life around them called 'actualities.'

**1900-1920** Travelogue or 'scenic' films become popular showcasing exoticized images from around the globe.

**1926** Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, *Man With A Movie Camera*.

**1939** John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in the support of war.

**1960s** The 'cinema vérité' movement began in Europe, followed by the 'direct cinema' in the US. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

**1968** The Argentine film, *La Hora de los Hornos*, opened the door to activist cinema of the 1970s, using film as a tool to counter capitalist politics in Latin America.

**1988** Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

**2000s** The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium more affordable to independent filmmakers. The term 'doc-umentary' comes to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema.