



TAKE THE LEAD

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New Line Cinema

New Line Cinema Presents

A Tiara Blu Films Production

TAKE THE LEAD

Antonio Banderas

Rob Brown

Yaya DaCosta

Dante Basco

John Ortiz

Laura Benanti

Marcus T. Paulk

Jenna Dewan

And
Alfre Woodard

Casting by
Avy Kaufman, C.S.A.

Choreography by
JoAnn Jansen

Executive Music Producer

Bonnie Greenberg

Music by
Aaron Zigman and Swizz Beatz

Costume Designer
Melissa Toth

Editor
Robert Ivison

Production Designer
Paul Denham Austerberry

Director of Photography
Alex Nepomniaschy

Executive Producers
Toby Emmerich
Matt Moore
Mark Kaufman
Ray Liotta
Mathew Hart

Produced by
Diane Nabatoff
Michelle Grace
Christopher Godsick

Written by
Dianne Houston

Directed by
Liz Friedlander

TAKE THE LEAD

Antonio Banderas stars in *Take the Lead*, a drama inspired by the true story of Pierre Dulaine, an inspirational Manhattan dance teacher and competitor who volunteers his time to teach ballroom dancing to a diverse group of New York inner-city high school students serving detention.

The students are initially skeptical of Dulaine, especially when they learn what he's there to teach them, but his unwavering commitment and dedication slowly inspire them to embrace his program. In fact, they even take it one step further and combine Dulaine's classical dance with their unique hip-hop style and music to create a high-energy, unique fusion. As Dulaine becomes a mentor for his students, many of whom haven't had much to strive towards in their lives, he inspires them to hone their craft for a prestigious city ballroom competition, and in return they share with each other valuable lessons about pride, respect and honor.

Joining Antonio Banderas in the talented ensemble cast are Rob Brown (*Coach Carter*, *Finding Forrester*), Yaya DaCosta (UPN's "Top Model"), Dante Basco (*Biker Boyz*), John Ortiz (*Narc*) Laura Benanti (*Nine*), Marcus T. Paulk (UPN's "Moesha"), Jenna Dewan (*Tamara*), and Alfre Woodard (*Beauty Shop*, ABC's "Desperate Housewives").

Take the Lead marks the feature film debut of veteran music video and commercial director Liz Friedlander (who has helmed videos for numerous artists including Joss Stone, U2, Blink 182 and Simple Plan). The film is written by Dianne Houston and produced by Diane Nabatoff, Michelle Grace and Christopher Godsick. The executive producers are Toby Emmerich, Matt Moore, Mark Kaufman, Ray Liotta and Mathew Hart.

The behind-the-scenes creative team includes cinematographer Alex Nepomniaschy, production designer Paul Denham Austerberry, editor Robert Ivison, costume designer Melissa Toth, music by Aaron Zigman and Swizz Beatz, choreographer JoAnn Jansen and hip-hop choreography from Rich and Tone Talauega.

New Line Cinema will release *Take the Lead* (rated PG-13 by the M.P.A.A. for “thematic material, language and some violence”) nationwide on April 7th, 2006.

The film’s soundtrack will be released by Universal Records on April 4th, 2006.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

The idea for *Take the Lead* came about when producer Diane Nabatoff saw a segment on the “CBS Early Show” about Pierre Dulaine, a dance teacher in the public schools of New York. Nabatoff was instantly intrigued by the idea of a man teaching ballroom dancing to young inner-city kids and became determined to find Dulaine and learn more about his story. After two months, she finally located him in New York and arranged a meeting. “I knew immediately that I had to tell this story, no matter how long it took to get it on screen,” recalls Nabatoff.

Nabatoff and her former producing partner Michelle Grace caught the interest of Christopher Godsick, then a Senior Vice President of Production at New Line Cinema, who sparked to the idea right away. “I have always enjoyed mentor-oriented stories as well as dance films,” says Godsick. “I felt Pierre’s story took the best from both genres. If we put together the right elements, it was easy to see this project’s full potential.”

With New Line Cinema on board, development of the preliminary idea began in earnest. While the story is clearly inspired by Pierre Dulaine’s work, the filmmakers decided to change some details to make the story more accessible. As a result, the school setting in *Take the Lead* was changed from an elementary school to a high school. “We made the kids older so they could be more relatable and open up the story, and we also decided to fuse the two forms of dance to broaden its appeal,” says Nabatoff.

Christopher Godsick continues, “We wanted to deal with more mature issues – issues that are magnified in high school.” The give and take involved in the relationship between Pierre and his students is also magnified. As he teaches them the classic dances, they infuse these unfamiliar forms with their own hip-hop moves, creating a fusion, a balance of both worlds. “The writer of *Take the Lead* was faced with a daunting task. Although we remained true to the spirit of Pierre’s work, the writer had to create a compelling story and endearing characters that engaged the audience. After a brief conversation, Dianne Houston came into the studio and painted us a wonderful picture,” says Godsick. “Dianne has an incredible voice and was at one time a dancer, which gives her an understanding, and an amazing take on the story,” adds Diane Nabatoff.

With a draft of the script complete, the search for the right director began. Liz Friedlander, a veteran music video director, was an easy choice. “The minute Liz walked in, it was just so clear to me,” recalls Nabatoff. “She totally understood the story and had tremendous respect for it. Her background in music videos and dance also gave her an understanding of the world of these kids and the audience we wanted to reach.” While Friedlander was initially attracted by the dance and music elements of the story, she says that “it was the amazing characters combined with the obvious elements of music and dance that I found most intriguing.” Godsick adds, “We knew we wanted a director who could capture the attention of the youth market. We met with several directors who were either good storytellers or possessed an interesting visual style. After meeting with Liz we knew that she was a double threat. Liz has the rare qualities of a complete filmmaker who can deliver on all fronts.”

Friedlander began working with screenwriter Houston to shape the story. She was particularly interested in ensuring that Dulaine be a character and not a caricature. Friedlander explains, “even though it’s a ‘fish out of water’ story, Pierre needs to be portrayed as a real person – one that walks and breathes and evolves. Because then he is that much more human and thus more extraordinary.”

As Friedlander and Houston developed the script, conversations began about finding an actor who could best portray the character of Pierre Dulaine on screen. Antonio Banderas was the obvious first choice. “Pierre is a person who can walk into a room, command attention and convince you to do the impossible. He has presence and charisma, and so does Antonio,” says Diane Nabatoff. For Christopher Godsick, Banderas’ appeal is widespread. “It’s simple: women want him and men want to be like him.”

“Antonio’s such a good person that you know he would have the purity of heart to bring insight to the character. He understands what it is to give and therefore he is fully able to understand and relate to Pierre. Both Antonio and Pierre have an old world flavor to them that rings true,” says Liz Friedlander.

Banderas committed to the character because “Pierre is different from anything that I have done before.” He was also interested in the story’s social relevance. “The story is urban,

contemporary and international. It uses dance as a vehicle to talk about problems that are out there on the streets of America, the streets of Europe.”

With Banderas on board, the process shifted to finding the remainder of the ensemble cast. The filmmakers wanted to fill the roles of the students/dancers with actors who would seem to be legitimately from the South Bronx. “I spent a lot of time in New York hanging around playgrounds and schools watching kids – what they did, how they related to each other, how they looked and how they dressed. I wanted the cast to look like what I’d observed, not a Hollywood version of that,” says Friedlander.

In addition, they had to decide whether to cast dancers who could act, or actors who could dance. The roles of Sasha, Ramos and Danjou needed to be really strong dancers, while the character Kurd’s charm lies in the fact that he isn’t a dancer at all. In the end, Pierre’s students are comprised of a selection of experienced actors such as Rob Brown (*Coach Carter*, *Finding Forrester*), who plays the disaffected Rock, and Brandon Andrews, who managed to land the role of Monster in his very first audition. “We couldn’t find an actor to play the role of Monster through the normal channels,” says producer Christopher Godsick. “Instead, we started calling high school football coaches from around the country to try and find a gentle giant who could move equally well on the field and on the dance floor. Fortunately, we were able to find Brandon at a local Los Angeles high school.” For the role of Morgan, an accomplished ballroom dancer, the filmmakers needed someone who, according to Liz Friedlander, “was a really, really good dancer.” Katya Virshilas, a trained ballroom dancer who has also competed extensively, was ultimately chosen for the role.

The young actors chosen to portray Pierre’s pupils related easily to the project that fuses dance with a message about the benefits of mentoring, discipline and creativity. Possessing a background in modern, ballet and jazz dance training, Yaya DaCosta was chosen for the role of LaRhette, a student who comes into her own through the process of taking Pierre’s classes. DaCosta felt an immediate affinity for the character. “I thought that the role was written just for me. LaRhette reminded me of myself in junior high school. That’s when I was introduced to dance. LaRhette is transformed through dance. She becomes more assured because she has discovered something that gives her life meaning.”

The film also charts the progress of the relationship between Rock and LaRhette. Their initial animosity towards each other evolves into a meeting of minds and hearts. In the beginning, they blame each other, by association, for the death of their brothers. Rob Brown explains, “There’s always tension whenever they’re together. Pierre forces them to work that tension out by partnering them in the waltz. So not only are they enemies that have to deal with each other, but they have to deal with each other face-to-face, eye-to-eye.” In the process Rock and LaRhette not only learn to waltz, they also learn to trust and care for each other.

The opportunity to work on *Take the Lead* was a dream come true for Dante Basco, who plays Ramos. “Before I was an actor, I was a dancer. In my whole career I’ve never gotten to dance in a movie. I started acting because of John Travolta in *Grease* and *Saturday Night Fever*.”

Alfre Woodard plays Augustine James, the principal who allows Pierre Dulaine to teach. “We wanted someone who could be a worthy opponent for Pierre. Alfre has that presence,” says producer Diane Nabatoff.

“I completely loved it. This was a movie I wanted to see,” recalls Woodard of her initial reading of the script. Of the relationship between Augustine and Pierre that starts as a contentious one, but eventually develops into one of mutual respect, Woodard says, “Augustine is about solving problems, and will do what’s necessary. She sees possibilities in Pierre. She tricks him into teaching her most problematic charges that spend their time in detention hall. When she sees that they listen to him, she has to recognize and respect that.”

Rounding out the ensemble cast is John Ortiz as Mr. Temple, a teacher who opposes the idea of Dulaine in the school.

Tango, merengue, salsa, foxtrot, waltz and hip hop, anyone? To prepare for the dance scenes, the actors went through an intensive, month-long rehearsal period under the direction of choreographer JoAnn Jansen. “I have to consider the geography of the room and the geometry of the movement,” says Jansen of her approach. Known for their ‘up to the minute’ choreography, brothers Rich and Tone Talauega added the hip-hop moves, which added to the classic dances resulted in the fusion style that dominates the last section of the film.

“JoAnn has done a tremendous number of movies, is an extraordinary choreographer and knows how to move actors for the camera. The Talauega Brothers are on the cutting edge of hip-hop dance, and have a very specific and exciting way of expressing movement. We knew that if we paired them together, we’d have a perfect blend,” explains producer Diane Nabatoff.

Many of the cast had no previous dance training, so Jansen first had to assess how much each actor needed to learn in order to portray their individual character. Her teaching focuses on using what the student/actor knows and building on those skills. Elijah Kelley, who plays Danjou, explains, “JoAnn incorporates your personal experiences into whatever your character is doing. It makes it much easier to transform into the character that you’re portraying on film.”

In his role as Pierre Dulaine, Banderas performs the tango to show his reluctant students the passion and excitement that can be evoked by ballroom. Contrary to popular belief, Banderas is not a trained dancer. “Many people think I am, but it’s because I have a facility for physicality,” says the actor. “I’ve never been a great dancer, but, after dancing with Chita Rivera for 228 performances on Broadway, I dared to play in this type of movie.”

Banderas’ training began at his home in Los Angeles. After arriving in Toronto shortly before production began, he began working specifically on the choreography. “JoAnn knows how to make a person look like a dancer even if they don’t dance at all. I know the tango because I learned it. It’s about learning the fundamentals and then you can improvise. You start acting like a dancer – how to look at the girl, position your body, the movement of the head; these things can make the audience believe that you are a better dancer than you actually are,” concludes Banderas.

In addition to training with JoAnn Jansen, her assistant Allen Walls and Tone Talauega, the main group of dancers had the opportunity to work with Pierre Dulaine himself. The verdict was unanimous: Dulaine’s charisma and his love of dance captivated them all. “Pierre’s a rare breed. Especially these days, there are not too many people that do things for nothing,” says Banderas of Dulaine’s willingness and commitment to share his love of dance. Jasika Nicole, who portrays Egypt, agrees, saying “Pierre is just a phenomenally talented man and

such a good teacher. He's easy to understand and treats everyone with respect. I feel so fortunate to have met him."

Though the rehearsal period was intense, the actors portraying Pierre's students came to appreciate the training and the life lessons. "It's something that you can use for the rest of your life," says Shawand McKenzie, who portrays "Big Girl."

In addition to dancing at the rehearsals, the actors also took their moves to the clubs. These forays gave them the opportunity to not only try their new moves on the public dance floor, but also to bond with each other. "This is one of the few films where you can go to a club and do research," says Dante Basco. Actress Jenna Dewan, who plays Sasha, continues, "We were lucky to have a month of rehearsals, because we got to know each other. We spent eight hours together, we went to clubs; we really bonded. In the movie you'll see it, because we're a group. When we go out to a club we take over the place; 'here's "*Take the Lead* coming in!"

Though recognized as a trendsetting choreographer in the ever-changing inner circle of hip-hop dance, Tone Talauega found that he, too, had a lot to learn from the rarefied, disciplined world of ballroom dancing. "Partner dancing is definitely a challenge for people from the hip-hop world because hip-hop dance is about one's self. Ballroom is a totally different animal. You have to be one with your partner; you have to look like twins."

Describing her initial vision for the film, director Liz Friedlander says, "I visualized the movie starting as a stylized documentary, then exploding into a Hollywood movie at the end." In discussions with her creative team, Friedlander stressed the idea that the film "should take its cues from the learning curve of the kids. As their world opens up, the movie should also 'open up' in look and feel."

This idea is carried through the production design, camera moves and costumes. For production designer Paul Austerberry, it meant showing that the characters come from "an impoverished background, which is then juxtaposed against the fantastical world of ballroom dance." As the film begins the colors used for the school are dominated by cool, harsh shades – blue grays – but as they are introduced to a world outside their own the tones become warmer.

For the closing scenes of the movie that take place in the ballroom during a dance competition, Austerberry drew inspiration from the plumes of a peacock. “The kids have gained confidence and it shows in the way they carry themselves – the colors support that growth,” he adds. These scenes were shot in the historic Royal York Hotel in downtown Toronto. It took two teams of eight painters 48 hours to prepare the space. In order to then restore the room back to its original state for a pre-scheduled wedding, it took 24 hours with 16 painters and several laborers working nonstop.

Friedlander and Austerberry had several discussions about the look of the dungeon-like school basement where Pierre teaches the students. “Liz had very specific ideas about the dungeon,” recalls Austerberry. “She envisioned a grimy, dark oppressive space that gets cleaner, brighter and more open as the students begin to accept Pierre’s lessons.”

To bring Friedlander’s vision to the screen, Austerberry scanned magazines and books and visited several schools and boiler rooms for ideas. “We wanted to give the sense of a really low corridor with pipes. We amalgamated ideas and materials from existing locations, existing school ballrooms and boilers rooms. I took pictures for color references and pulled images from books and magazines. Liz and I would go through and filter out the kind of things we wanted and we grouped them to create the dungeon.”

Cinematographer Alex Nepomniaschy welcomed the opportunity to show the progression of the characters as they discover themselves and their world through dance. The lighting in the dungeon is cold and hard fluorescents, but the color temperature is changed, and more light is shown through the windows as the students get more personally invested in the dance.

In terms of camera movement, Nepomniaschy utilized a hand held camera to shoot scenes with Rock and LaRhette to reflect the instability of their home lives. By contrast, the scenes in Pierre Dulaine’s home are very precise and fluid in their composition.

“We purposely built some cold weather scenes in the film so that the characters can be seen cocooned in their puffy coats in the beginning and then we watch as they shed their skin,” explains Liz Friedlander. To achieve the level of realism needed for the movie, costumer Melissa Toth “took inspiration from the streets of New York. I shopped at all the places the

kids in this world would shop. I also listened to ideas from the actors, as they have a good sense of what rings true.”

During her research, Toth and her assistant would walk the streets and do a lot of surreptitious photography of street wear of New York teenagers, as well as visiting stores where she felt the characters would shop. While she was familiar with contemporary hip-hop style, Toth knew that she had to conduct research for the ballroom sequences. “I didn’t have a clue about ballroom before starting this job. I went to a ballroom competition in New York and ended up staying all day. I was fascinated by the costumes. Hip-hop and ballroom fashions are two very separate elements and it was very exciting to tackle them both.”

She discovered that there’s an ebb and flow to fashion in the world of competitive ballroom dance. “I learnt that nobody wears feathers on their costumes anymore. Now it’s all about Swarovski crystals. These days, everything is encrusted with them,” says Toth. She also discovered that ballroom costumes are technically dance costumes. “They are very technical. Under the glamorous exterior, they’re built like bathing suits, like a gymnastic or ice skating costume. From afar they look like a beautiful formal dress but they’re actually quite technically proficient underneath.”

A lot of Toth’s approach to costuming characters involves the individual actors and what they bring to the character. “A lot of the kids are from New York, so they grew up on the street, knowing what’s right and what’s not right.” It’s an approach that the actors appreciated. “Melissa’s mad cool. I had a vision of Ramos, and I explained it to her, and she was totally open to it,” explains Dante Basco.

In combination with the dance elements, music plays an integral role in *Take the Lead*. Director Liz Friedlander says her goal was to have the music serve as a vehicle for “both sides, Pierre and his students, to gain an appreciation for other kinds of music. It’s certainly something that has happened to me through the process of directing this movie. I’ve now listened to literally hundreds of tangos and salsas and meringues, a lot of musical styles that I hadn’t been exposed to previously.”

With the wealth of musical styles that appear in the film, Friedlander feels that “it’s important to realize the sort of validity in all kinds of music. If you listen to hip-hop, some of it is very

political, but some is lifestyle based. And then the same thing happens in salsa music – they are singing about the same thing that people are rapping about, it's just different lifestyles and forms of expression. And there's so many types of drum loops that are the same style but from different types of music. Hopefully what we have done is found a thread to weave through, so that it doesn't feel like one song after another, and that we can bring a validity to it across the board."

The filmmakers enlisted noted music supervisor Bonnie Greenberg to help assemble the eclectic soundtrack of classic standards and today's sounds, which at times in the film are "mashed up" to create a cool, edgy hybrid of music from different generations.

For the standards, it was decided early on to pay homage to the classic American composers George and Ira Gershwin, which was made possible through the cooperation of the Gershwin Estate and Warner Chappell publishing. Additionally, a line of dialogue included in the film as an homage to the Gershwins was written in consultation with the Estate.

For the film's original music, Greenberg sought out and recruited collaborators from around the world. This included a new modern tango from Bailongo in Buenos Aires; from Scotland, the DJ Grant McSleazy created the "Mashup" (a hybrid of six songs combined together to create a fresh sound); from New York, the brilliant hip-hop producer Swizz Beatz co-wrote and produced the end credit music, in addition to teaming up with noted film composer Aaron Zigman as the co-composer of film's score; from Puerto Rico, the reggaetone stars Wisin and Yandel co-created and recorded the music for the big dance finale, along with Bone Thugs, Fat Man Scoop, Drag-on, and Myelissa.

Greenberg forged collaborations and innovative pairings from diverse musical worlds, pairing rapper Q-Tip (from a Tribe Called Quest) with a classic Lena Horne recording of the Gershwin's "I've Got Rhythm," as well as having him rap on a modern recoding of the traditional tango "La Cumparsita."

In addition, the film features new music by LL Cool J, Freeway, DMX, the Youngbloodz, Topic, Akon, Swizz Beatz, Kem, jae Millz and Remy Ma, along with classics from Nat King

Cole, Dinah Washington, Keely Smith, June Christy, Sly and The Family Stone and the Black Eyed Peas.

“We’ve tried to create a new sound of music with this film,” says Greenberg. “At every opportunity we tried to merge different worlds of music together. We chose to hire a traditional film composer, Aaron Zigman, and a great hip hop producer, Swizz Beatz, to collaborate in creating the score. In some scenes we’ve taken contemporary tango and mixed it with hip-hop beats. In others, we took standards and mixed them with hip-hop beats. At times we’ve merged all three together into one piece of music.”

Liz Friedlander’s debut as a feature film director has won her some lifelong fans. She earned the respect of her cast with her willingness to collaborate and incorporate their ideas for their characters into her overall vision for the film. Yaya DaCosta found Friedlander’s approach invaluable in helping her to tackle her first feature role. “Liz helped me a lot in understanding my character because she was open to conversation from the beginning to the end. LaRhette grew through our conversations.” Antonio Banderas agrees. “Liz has a fantastic approach to actors. She doesn’t put you in a tube, where you are totally trapped by her directions. She says, ‘this is what I would like. Now, how you going to get in there? I don’t know. You show me.’ I hope that this is not going to be the last time that we work together.”

The rapport between his younger cast-members also captivated Banderas. “The success of the movie lies in that group of kids interacting with each other on screen. Sometimes society forgets about kids that are in urban neighborhoods and public schools. They are very susceptible to end up with a gun in their hands, or drugs. But if you put in a little attention and a little love - the results are magnificent. You can literally change society, because they are the future. It is there.”