

Miss Tibet

Beauty in Exile



Directed by Norah Shapiro

Produced by Norah Shapiro & Kelly Nathe

©2014 Flying Pieces Productions

~ contact: norah@flyingpiecesproductions.com ~



~ Logline ~

Competing in a western-style Tibetan beauty pageant in India propels an American Teen on an unlikely journey toward a political and cultural awakening.

~ Short Synopsis ~

High in the Indian Himalayas, in the epicenter of the exiled Tibetan world, a maverick Tibetan impresario stages an unexpected spectacle: a western-style beauty pageant. When a Tibetan-American teenager travels to India to participate in this 'pageant with a difference,' she finds herself not just competing for a crown, but confronting the intersection between her cultural identity and life in the western world.



~ Long Synopsis ~

Within a culture long revered for spirituality and a high value placed on inner beauty, a maverick Tibetan promoter engages in a most un-Tibetan undertaking: a western-style beauty pageant. *Miss Tibet: Beauty in Exile* follows Tenzin Khecheo, a Tibetan-American teenager from Minnesota as she travels to the Indian Himalayas to compete in this “beauty pageant with a difference.”

Pageant founder Lobsang Wangyal seeks to fill a void within the Tibetan exile community by bringing a bit of glamour into his corner of the world. Complete with catwalks and evening gowns, he sees his pageant as an opportunity for exiled Tibetan women to both immerse themselves in Tibetan culture and to add their voices to global fight for a free Tibet by using the pageant as a unlikely political platform.

Traveling from the US to Dharamsala with her mother and little sisters in tow, Tenzin Khecheo finds herself feeling like a fish out of water, surrounded by contemporary Tibetans desperately clinging their culture while striving to return to their homeland. With slim





hopes the situation in Tibet will improve in the imaginable future, the stakes for holding on to “Tibetan-ess” has reached an all-time high. Yet the film’s main characters defy Tibetan stereotypes, from beginning to end, as they navigate the pull between preserving their ancient culture and living fully in the modern world, as evidenced by Khecheo’s own attempts to find her Tibetan identity just as she reconciles just how American she has become.

~ Crew Bios ~

PRODUCER/DIRECTOR Norah Shapiro left a decade-long career as a public defender to pursue the adventures of documentary filmmaking. Her first feature, “If You Dare,” about an inner-city theater company working with at-risk children, premiered at the Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival, aired on Twin Cities Public Television, and is in the collections of universities and libraries around the US and Canada. She is a McKnight Filmmaking Fellow and has received grants for “Miss Tibet: Beauty in Exile” from the Jerome Foundation, Minnesota State Arts Board, and the Minnesota Filmmakers Legacy Finishing Fund. She is currently co-directing and producing, along with Kelly Nathe, a documentary about Minnesota 13 Moonshine, which also received funding from the Minnesota Filmmakers Legacy Fund.

PRODUCER Kelly Nathe is also a writer and director who credits include feature documentaries for Public Interest Pictures and Michael Moore, as well as an array of docu-series for A&E, MTV, VH1, Discovery, TLC, and Granada and ITV in the UK. She is a recipient of several filmmaking grants from the Jerome Foundation, Minnesota State Arts Board, and General Mills Foundation. Her documentary, “Hotel Hidajet,” about life in post-war Bosnia, received awards at SXSW and Slamdance Film Festivals, and was broadcast nationally on PBS. She is currently co-directing and producing, along with Norah Shapiro, a documentary about Minnesota 13 Moonshine.

CO-PRODUCER/EDITOR Lisa Blackstone is an Emmy-nominated director, producer, writer, and editor whose work has been seen nationally on PBS, Animal Planet, HGTV, and MSNBC. Her documentary “Polka Time” aired nationally on the acclaimed PBS series “Independent Lens,” and her documentary about girls competitive wrestling, “Grappling Girls,” was shown at the Lunafest in San Francisco. She recently produced “Lost Twin Cities IV” for Twin Cities Public Television and is currently producing on another TPT program about the Minnesota State Fair.

EDITOR Jennifer Steinman is also a director and producer whose work has aired nationally on PBS, ABC, Discovery, National Geographic, Sundance Channel, and more. She’s won a Telly award and an Emmy nomination for Outstanding Achievement in Editing. Her feature documentary “Motherland” premiered at the SXSW Film Festival, where it won an Audience Award, and went on to win several other best-of-fest awards, and was distributed by Vanguard Cinema. Her most recent documentary, “Desert Runners,” also won numerous audience awards at film festivals worldwide.

COMPOSER Tom Scott writes and records music for narrative features, documentaries, commercials, and theatre and dance performances. His documentary scoring work includes the Emmy winners “Standing the Test of Time,” and “Northstar: Minnesota’s Black Pioneers,” as well as the Academy Award-nominated “War Dance.” He contributed to the score of the Academy Award-winning film “Monster’s Ball.” and conducted the Slovak National Symphony Orchestra for the score of “Machine Gun Preacher.” He was one of 12 international composers selected to participate in the 2003 ASCAP Film Scoring Workshop and has presented at scoring and recording workshops internationally, including at the Zanzibar International Film Festival (2004, 2005). He is a McKnight Composer Fellow and a Bush Artist Fellow. Recent work includes arrangements for the Kenyan Boys Choir in Nairobi for National Geographic Network, and Rihanna’s ‘Half of Me’ documentary.





CINEMATOGRAPHER Ronny Novick, our Dharamsala-based cameraman, has focused his work on Tibet since 1991. His award-winning documentary, “Strange Spirit: One Country’s Occupation,” is included in Stanford University’s film program. In 2004, at the request of the Dalai Lama, he traveled to India to document the personal stories of exiled Tibetans, and decided to relocate there permanently. He is a regular member of film crews for the Dalai Lama’s teachings, in addition to producing segments on current Tibetan affairs for Voice of America, and Nickelodeon, and the BBC.

~ Director Norah Shapiro ~

From the moment I learned of the existence of a Tibetan beauty pageant, I was hooked. Drawn to the seeming paradox between Tibetan Buddhism’s value of inner beauty vs. conventional beauty pageant emphasis on appearance. I assumed it would be far more controversial within the Tibetan community than it ultimately turned out to be. To my surprise, it had come to be embraced by many Tibetan exiles as an alternative political platform, as well as a rare opportunity for publicly celebrating national pride. As I learned more about the event, it became clear that, while this pageant did include some of the elements that fueled my negative feelings about beauty pageants (i.e. objectification of women), at the same time I discovered there is a whole side to Tibetan exile culture beyond Buddhist Monks and Nuns. I began to see ways in which this particular pageant offered exiled Tibetans opportunities to explore the breadth of their identity, gain attention, feel modern, and have something to celebrate in the midst of an increasingly desperate situation inside their homeland.

On a personal level, I came to see Tenzin Khecheo’s struggles around cultural identity as far more similar to my own than I initially was aware. I realized a large part of why I was so drawn to this subject was due to the parallels between the Tibetan exile story and my own Jewish heritage, an ethnic and religious culture with ancient traditions, threatened by adversity and diaspora. Like Khecheo, I was raised secularly, by the children of immigrants, with no formal religious education. And like Khecheo’s feelings of “Tibetan-ess,” an innate sense of being “Jewish” is part and parcel of who I am, and I think I will forever be grappling with which traditions to hold on to, which to let go, and how to reconcile my Jewish identity with my secular self. Khecheo is just starting this kind of self-inquiry, navigating being Tibetan and American, trying to find her way and who she is as she transitions into becoming an adult.

Though my opinions about beauty pageants have not changed for the most part, I do have a new understanding of the complexity involved in their appeal in certain circumstances. And, in Khecheo’s case, I see her choice to compete in this pageant as quite brave, in her willingness to forge a new path, and be honest with herself (and my camera) about her ambivalence as she figures it out.

While the particulars of “Miss Tibet: Beauty in Exile” are specific to the Tibetan culture, I believe the themes are universal ones, faced by all immigrants and cultures who struggle with the balance between assimilation and tradition. Ultimately, this film seeks to explore the complexity of cultural identity in the modern world, the difficulty of holding on to traditions, and what gets lost and what gets retained in the process.





~ Crew ~

Director ~ Norah Shapiro
Producers ~ Norah Shapiro ~ Kelly Nathe ~ Lisa Blackstone
Editors ~ Lisa Blackstone ~ Norah Shapiro ~ Jennifer Steinman
Cameras ~ Ronny Novick ~ Norah Shapiro ~ Kelly Nathe ~ Mike Forstein
Original Score ~ Tom Scott
Animation ~ Jordan Hill
Original Illustrations from the book "Where is Tibet?" by Gina Halpern
Title Graphic Design ~ Molly Orth

~ Cast ~

Tenzin Khecheo
Lobsang Wangyal ~ Producer/Director of the Miss Tibet Pageant
Chemi Lhazom & Dolma Tsering & Ngodup Dolma ~ other Miss Tibet contestants
Tenzin Sangmo & Tenzin Yangkyi ~ other Miss Tibet contestants
Heidi Swank, Ph.D
Carole McGranahan, Prof. of Anthropology, Tibetan Studies; University of Colorado, Boulder
Chime Yangzom
Samdhong Rinpoche, Former Prime Minister, Tibetan-Government-in-Exile
Andree Marie Dussault, Foreign Correspondent
Tsering Chungtak, Miss Tibet 2006
Chitue Youdon Aukastsang, Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile Member
Chitue Thubten Wangchen, Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile Member
Chitue Sharling Tenzin Dadon, Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile Member
Master Chondhen
Dr. Tenzin Namdul
Tsering Choedup
Tenzin Wangdu
Ama Adhe
Lobsang Sangay, Prime Minister, Tibetan Government-in-Exile

