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Patron: Meier, Nicholas

Journal Title: Brill's content.

MaxCost: \$25IFM

Volume: 3 Issue:

Fax: (831)582-3875

Month/Year: February 2000

Ariel: 198.189.249.141

Pages: 63-64

Email:

library_document_delivery@csumb.edu

Article Author: Meier, Deborah

Shipping Address:

Article Title: ; Fiddling with Facts

California State University,
Monterey Ba

Imprint: New York, NY ; Brill Media Ventures, c19

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fiddling with facts

Miramax Films called *Music of the Heart*—set in a school that I founded—an inspirational true story, but to me it looks like a creative take on reality. BY DEBORAH MEIER

Twenty years ago, I was the director of the Central Park East I elementary school in East Harlem in New York City. We hired a young violin teacher named Roberta Tzavaras—the same Roberta Tzavaras portrayed (as Roberta Guaspari) by Meryl Streep in the recent Miramax film *Music of the Heart*.

The film is presented as the true story of a courageous, determined teacher who, against long odds, pushes her inner-city students to unlikely heights.

One would imagine that the film's release would be a joyous occasion for the teacher it celebrates and the school in which she worked. But I received a letter from Roberta not long after the movie's release in which she expressed regret over the "controversy" aroused by *Music of the Heart* within the Central Park East community and tried to explain that she was not responsible for its untruths. Roberta wrote that she had never meant to hurt anyone and that she loved CPE and its two sister schools. All she wanted, she continued, was to promote the cause of music education for all children.

To what controversy was she referring? Elements in the film have been fictionalized or fabricated to make it more dramatic and more simplistic. This is to be expected, of course, with any Hollywood film. But when a fictional-

ized account presents itself as truth, the falsehoods can do substantial harm to real human beings and institutions: in this case a school—Central Park East I—and the parents, teachers, and kids who created and sustain it. Moreover, by turning the truth on its head, *Music of the Heart* alters the historical meaning of the events it portrays and reinforces some destructive myths about public schools in America. This fictionalized retelling, in which Roberta is the lone voice of high expectations, fits in with a general climate of public-school bashing, but the true story does not.

The true story had already been told in an excellent—and accurate—documentary titled *Small Wonders*. If the makers of *Music of the Heart* had wanted to come up with their own version of that story, they should have more thoroughly fictionalized the institution and individuals involved. They did decide to change many individuals' names, including Roberta's. But they chose to use Central Park East's unique name, its actual address, and various other characteristics of its history that

make it unmistakable. Its "realness" plays a central part both in the selling of the movie and in the movie itself. A tiny disclaimer that appears at the end of the credits notes that "some main characters have been composited or invented and a number of incidents fictionalized."

Everything else about the film—from the opening credits to a final

addendum urging viewers to send money to Roberta's organization—speaks to its supposed verisimilitude. A Miramax press release claims that "*Music of the Heart* is the true story of Roberta Guaspari," a claim invariably repeated by critics. There's just enough truth to make the claim seem honest: The real names of the two other East Harlem schools where Roberta worked also appear in the movie. Roberta does live in East Harlem, and she did approach the principal (me) with a proposal to run a Suzuki-type music program in about 1980. She did own 50 or so violins, and she did create a successful program for between 30 and 50 children in our school. The program eventually did expand into our two sister schools, where it also served many students. And it's true that school district funds used to pay for the program were slashed in a massive New York City budget cut in 1990, and that a concert organized to raise money for the program was held in Carnegie Hall by a group of New York's finest musicians. These facts were presented in *Music*



of the Heart, the book *Music of the Heart: The True Story That Inspired The Miramax Film* (published by Talk Miramax books), and—with a couple of exceptions—in the Miramax-distributed *Small Wonders*.

What's not true is what *Music of the Heart* does with these facts. In that film—as opposed to the documentary and the book—Central Park East is shown as a fairly stereotypical inner city school, the kind where one student is killed in a drive-by shooting and another is caught carrying a box-cutter knife (though the killing does not happen on school grounds). The principal (me again, though my actual title in those days was teacher-director), with very few allies and with teachers she'd be happy to get rid of (but for tenure), struggles to turn the school around. Together, the principal and the violin teacher team up to demonstrate what can be done for children if one is willing to defy the odds, care enough, be tough, and have high expectations. The movie portrays, in some detail, as a counterfoil to the heroic Roberta, a particularly mean and lazy music teacher who, apparently protected only by his tenure, ignores the children's musical potential in favor of his own rigid teaching style. With the exception of one character, played by Gloria Estefan, the rest of the school's teachers are nonentities or, in one case, a "bitch." None of the above is remotely true.

In reality, Central Park East and its sister schools are famous examples of highly successful alternative public schools. Central Park East was founded in the fall of 1974 to develop a largely staff-run model of school reform. As its founding director, I received a MacArthur Fellowship for my work there at precisely the time this film depicts. There were no drive-by shootings of our students, or children caught on school grounds carrying concealed box cutters, as is shown in *Music of the Heart*. (Amazingly, not even one student from CPE's first six graduating classes had died violently as of 1994, according to a study conducted by David Bensman of Rutgers University.) Meanwhile, only a small percentage of each school's students were ever directly affected by Roberta's stellar work, because she was able to teach only a small number of each school's students. One could claim, as Bensman did in his study, that CPE's regular music teacher, Barry Solowey (an almost comical villain in *Music of the Heart*), was an important factor in the school's eminence. Solowey began working at the school in 1974 shortly after its founding. He soon was the conductor of three large choruses that performed citywide, expertly taught large numbers of children the recorder, produced an annual opera that brought much acclaim to the school, and staged an occasional Broadway-style musical—while at the same time providing regular music classes to all 250 students—year in and year out for 25 years. He's still at it.

In short, Roberta was one star among many. For each student in the school, a particular teacher, program, or experience was the turning point. But it was because of the school's capacity to create so many such possible turning points that so much success was generated. It was the collective strength and sense of mutual responsibility to one another and the community that made CPE and its sister schools unusual—the precise opposite of the movie's point. CPE was

a teacher's dream: a largely staff-run school.

What is obscured by *Music of the Heart*—and what made CPE special—is the way the school represented the power of an important idea: When parents and teachers are allowed—and, in fact, supported by the kind of innovative school administrators who opened the door to CPE's creation—to act on their visions, magical things can happen to otherwise "ordinary" people. One of those magical things is that all kinds of otherwise hidden talents—violin playing, for example—blossom. The creation of a setting in which so many people feel a sense of ownership—without worrying much about external regulations—is the ingredient that made the CPE network special and hard to kill. The schools were unusually small (although housed in large buildings that contained other programs), which probably helped. With the support of the teachers' union and the superintendent, they, along with many other schools in East Harlem (and later in other districts in New York City), also had substantially more freedom to hire staff, shape their budgets, and set their own working rules. Parents also had choices among East Harlem schools and therefore felt more owner-

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ship and loyalty to the school of their choice. All of this information is absent from *Music of the Heart*, leaving the movie stripped of context that would help explain why Roberta proved so successful.

An even more damaging implication in this reworked version of reality: Tenure (i.e., the teachers' union) was to blame for the threatened extinction of Roberta's program. This kind of oversimplification plays to the worst stereotypes about what's wrong with public education in this country—and downplays that it was actually a local government uninterested in arts education that was Roberta's real enemy.

In the end, Miramax injured the reputation of the Central Park East-River East schools and their 25-year history of success. It also demeaned an extraordinary music teacher (though it changed his name) who took on the bulk of the task of creating the school's musical standards. Real people were thus harmed in order to tell a story that, by confirming prejudices about public schools, Miramax knew it could sell.

CPE created an exemplar for the creation of hundreds of small public schools of choice throughout the nation. I understand that it was easier for Miramax to tell the story audiences expect—a moving tale of a heroic teacher and the power of music to transform. If it hadn't hurt so much to see friends belittled and a school slighted, I'd have enjoyed *Music of the Heart*, as I do so many other familiar but well-told, if not quite true, tales. But Miramax chose otherwise, leaving us with this question: What gives Hollywood the right to play loose with the real lives of real people—and real schools—just to tickle the heartstrings of a sentimental public?

Editor's note: Miramax cochairman Harvey Weinstein, a coproducer of *Music of the Heart*, was given the opportunity to respond to Meier in this space, but chose not to in time for our deadline. ■

Deborah Meier, the principal of Boston's Mission Hill School, founded New York Central Park East I school, the setting for Music of the Heart.