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GIRL RISING | DIRECTOR'S Q & A



Q&A with the Director of Girl Rising, Academy Award-Nominee Richard E. Robbins

The film is a hybrid of a documentary and narrative film. Can you explain what that means?

Well, my approach to filmmaking is about problem solving. So when we decided that we wanted to tell the stories of these girls, we began to talk about the most effective ways to do that. And each chapter is different. Some involve actors. Some don't. Some involve scripted dialogue, while others have no speaking at all. For us it was really about the best way to tell each story. I like to think that we have the best of both worlds: the truth of a documentary with the control and flexibility of fiction.

You found an incredible group of young women around the world. How did you cast these girls?

We probably met thousands of girls in pre-production. In each of our countries we worked with our partners who deal with these girls every day—organizations that work directly on girls' education issues. They helped us meet girls. So we traveled a lot, doing dozens of interviews in each location. But the final selection of each girl was made by the writer who helped tell her story. To us the whole idea was that we wanted our audience to hear a story from the girl's point of view—so the story needed to be crafted by someone who understood the girl's situation better than I could. That emotional connection was really the most important thing, because we want to make the audience feel for the girls. Our writers are very accomplished women who come from the same countries as the girls. Each chose a girl she felt connected to, then they spent some time together, and the stories emerged from that.

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My job, the job of the film, is to change minds—not just to make people understand that girls' education is important, but to make them believe that the change we need is possible. That these girls are just like our girls. Like girls everywhere. Smart, powerful, and eager to make the world better.”

– Director, Richard Robbins

How did you get involved with this project?

For better or worse, this project was my idea. I was researching a project on a related subject when I stumbled onto some of the new studies about the power of educating girls. It blew my mind. I had the reactions that I hope our audience will have: “This is amazing!” and “I have to do something to help!” For me, help became making this movie. I never dreamed it would grow to the scale it has, but there are a handful of subjects that ought to be given as big and ambitious a treatment as we can muster, and this is surely one of them.

You have assembled an incredible group of narrators and authors. Can you talk about how you got them involved with the project?

For me, the film is about giving a voice to these girls. We wanted the best voices we could find. Some of that was getting the writers to help with the words and the story structure. But another important piece was the literal

voice. What these actresses can do with their voices—their ability to communicate complicated emotion solely through the sound they generate—that is a truly remarkable thing. Hearing Meryl Streep bring Maaza Mengiste’s words to life was one of the absolute high points on this whole project for me.

What do you want the audience to take away from the film?

I want the audience to care about these girls—to care about all girls. And I want them to care enough that they want to try and do something to help. Because they *can* help. It’s that simple.

What was the most memorable part of shooting?

Every one of our journeys overseas was a life-changing experience. We shot in some of the roughest circumstances I’ve ever encountered. Worse even than when working in war zones for ABC News. Shooting in Peru at 17,000 feet in the snow. Taking a steadicam through a tent camp in Haiti. Filming on an insanely crowded street in 105 degree heat in Calcutta. So there is a lot of memorable hardship that was involved in the making of this movie.

But without question the things I remember most are the interactions with the girls themselves. Every time our energy flagged or we had problems on the production, we only needed to glance over at the girl whose story we were telling and everything seemed possible. They never felt sorry for themselves. They have boundless energy and optimism. They work harder than I do... and I work pretty hard.



Most of all, I loved sitting down with each girl and showing her the pictures of the other girls in the film. I’d get to talk about their stories and kind of introduce this little group to each other. They understood inherently that what we were doing wasn’t just about them, it was about all girls. That was just incredible.

What can viewers do to help the cause?

Well, awareness counts for a lot. Understanding the issue. Talking about it. Reading about it. Telling your friends. Talking to your kids or your parents. Even before you act, just knowing and caring about these girls—that really matters to me, and I believe to the girls too.

But more directly, these girls need help. They are the most powerless inhabitants on the planet. They have the least money, the least protection, the least opportunity. And amazingly they have the most profound impact on changes we all want: less poverty, less injustice, less violence. So I would urge people to find a way to get involved with our **partner organizations**. These are people whose work we have seen firsthand. They are doing incredible things out there in the world: we just need to help them do more of it.

And anyone can help Girl Rising continue to help girls by contributing to our campaign, where donations are welcome and appreciated. Please visit **girlrising.com** for details.

Richard E. Robbins is an award-winning documentary director, writer, and producer. His most recent documentary, Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience, about soldiers returning from Iraq, was nominated for an Academy Award in 2008. After several years at ABC News and PBS, Richard joined Peter Jennings’ documentary unit at ABC News, and directed the critically acclaimed ABC series The Century. His documentary work for ABC took him around the country and the globe, from the mountains of Kashmir interviewing Al-Qaeda militants, to the press plane of the 2000 Bush campaign, to the back of an LAPD squad car patrolling Watts. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife, daughter and son. (Left: Richard with Azmera during the Ethiopia film shoot.)