



Paris Is Burning

by Michelle Parkerson

Paris Is Burning is a remarkable new documentary, remarkable for its kinetic film sense, unique subject matter and brutal honesty. With Cheryl Lynn's '70s disco hit "Got To Be Real," an echoing leitmotif throughout the soundtrack, *realness* underscores every element of this already legendary but infrequently exhibited film by Jennie Livingston and Barry Swimar.

Paris Is Burning reveals the world of the "Children," as Black gay men and women lovingly call ourselves. In an urban universe of African American and Latino men—transvestites, transsexuals, and young street queens in New York City—this riveting documentary examines the community's flamboyant rituals of balls and "voguing." The film emerges as something far beyond sensational anthropology. It is, ultimately, an up-front humane chronicle of overcoming adversity with audacity.

Paris Is Burning contributes significantly to a growing body of films and videos illuminating the Black gay experience. In league with Isaac Julien's lush meditation, *Looking for Langston* (1988) and Marlon Riggs' award-winning *Tongues Untied* (1989), this feature-length documentary ranks among the best in rendering visible the varied images of Black gay men, validating their passion and their stories *in their*

own words. Livingston's engaging direction and the visual style of Paul Gibson's *in your face* verite cinematography absorb viewers (straight and gay) into the lives, triumphs and tragedies of those brothers whose identities are defined by the ball circuit.

Paris Is Burning boasts an impressively diverse cast: Dorian Corey, a still stately diva from the bygone era of Harlem *showgirl* drag queens, who narrates and delivers some of the most insightful and invective soundbites in the entire film; Pepper La-beija, the fortyish "mother" of the House of La-beija who has endured two decades of trends in the illusory world of the Children and is still a marvel of attitude and style; Willi Ninja, one of the success stories of *Paris Is Burning*, handsome, phenomenally talented, ambitious, a young man who hitches his star to cross-over dreams of MTV voguing; Octavia Saint Laurent, a model who aspires to high fashion and a sex change operation; and Venus Xtravaganza, whose grisly murder reveals the seamy underside of "the life"—hustling, homelessness, AIDS.

This extensive cross-section of voices and survival stories provides the film's structure and skillful transitions. Common to all is a shared experience of being stigmatized. Ostracized by family, the Black community and



larger society, these men create a temporal reality that mocks the existence of racism, homophobia

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and exclusion. Walking the ballroom floor, the Children find status and worth.

As personal histories generate the dramatic tension of *Paris Is Burning*, the ball segments display the visceral, first-hand exuberance of the Children's shining hour. The ball is heightened to modern ritual and social commentary. At the balls, the young Black gay men, transvestites and transsexuals can be anything they want to be. Playing

outrageously impersonate "normalcy."

Dorian Corey sagaciously explains the dichotomy of the ball's allure: "It's a small fame. You like the adulation, the applause...In real life, you can't get an executive job unless you have the educational background and the opportunity. Black people have a hard time getting anywhere. And those that do are usually straight. In a ballroom, you look like an

biting parodies of the stereotypes Black people internalize about each other, such as the "Banjee" competition featuring impersonations of the gum-chewing young girl on welfare or the crackhead boy on the block. Corey succinctly airs his generation's drag manifestations of self-hatred: "When I grew up, you wanted to look like Marlene Dietrich or Betty Grable. Nobody wanted to look like Lena Horne."

Paris Is Burning does not utilize to full advantage the synthesized funk of house music in its soundtrack. But the film deftly ex-



to perfection the caricatures of white America and its icons, the Children reverse the equation of rejection facing all, but particularly homosexual, Black males. The least in life mock the privileged few as society's "freaks"

executive, and you're, therefore, showing the straight world that you can be an executive."

White society isn't the only sacrificial lamb on the ballroom floor. Many of the *realness* masterpieces of *Paris Is Burning* are

GLOSSARY



READING: Black drag queen's version of "the dozens"

BALL: Impersonation parades driven by heavy doses of "house" dance music and outrageous moderating by the ball's M.C. Balls include competitive categories spoofing the rich and the famous and the everyday—such as "Dynasty," "Executive Realness," and "Butch Queen (First Time in Drag at a Ball)."

HOUSE: "Black gay street gangs;" "families for Children who don't have any family."

VOGUEING: An acrobatic dance form based on stylized modeling poses from *Vogue* magazine; the physical equivalent of reading (cutting each other up on the dance floor).

Photos by Jennie Livingston

plores the vogue dance craze, tracing its subculture roots in the Black gay club scene. The events are correctly referenced as revolutionary trends in Black gay cultural history.

The artistry of Willi Ninja exemplifies how African American cultural expression—our music, dance, etc.—becomes coopted and diluted for mass appeal. Take, for example, the MTV voguing packaged by Madonna for mainstream consumption that became the international dance trend of the late '80s. *Paris Is Burning* also reiterates the failure of the mainstream to compensate, and often to even acknowledge, the creative Black genius it so eagerly

exploits.

Quite naturally, *Paris Is Burning*, in dealing frankly with the world of transvestites and transsexuals, delves into the subject of sex-change operations. The film challenges heterosexual presumptions and reveals a wide berth of options among the Children on this issue.

On one hand, Brooke and Carmen Xtravaganza display their bodies in swimsuit and hot pants, respectively, on a New York beach and carry on a hilarious callresponse on the wonders of transsexualism, including how the operations complete their self-concepts as women. On the other hand, Pepper Labeija posits that a sex

change is not the answer: "A lot of kids got the sex change because they felt, 'Oh, I've been treated so bad as a drag queen.' But women get treated bad. They get beat. They get robbed. They get dogged. So [being a woman] doesn't mean you're going to have a fabulous life. It might, in fact, be worse."

Nothing is too sacred or too *de rigueur* for dissection in *Paris Is Burning*, and Joel Oppenheim's masterful, playful editing weaves the film's myriad aspects into an exciting whole. All great documentaries are good dramas and *Paris Is Burning* goes further by being a politically astute, historically important document of our precarious times.