



Dressed To Thrill

PARIS IS BURNING

(A documentary directed by Jennie Livingston, unrated)

THE YOUNG MEN featured in *Paris Is Burning*, Jennie Livingston's witty and profound documentary about the rituals of the new urban drag-queen subculture, sometimes recall the female impersonators of the '50s, '60s, and early '70s. Those haughtily ironic exhibitionists performed in back-room nightclubs and hid themselves behind wigs, false eyelashes, and sequins, frequently imitating the famous stars (Monroe, Garland, Streisand) whom they felt incarnated their secret, glamorous selves. The black and Latino gays in *Paris Is Burning* compete at drag balls (the movie takes its name from one in Harlem), where the ultimate object isn't simply to become a beautiful woman but to be "real"—to duplicate, with utter perfection, the form and essence of a straight person. This goal, an almost metaphysical recasting of the desire to "pass," represents a fusion of gay and

ethnic anxieties regarding the lust for acceptance in mainstream society. (The irony, of course, is that the people here attain "realness" when they're least like themselves.) What's being judged—as it was in the old drag clubs—isn't merely a costume but an act, an élan, an ability to crawl inside the skin of your own fantasy.

Yet something crucial has changed. The people in *Paris Is Burning*, most of them in their teens and early 20s, are, for the most part, children of gay liberation. They've grown up well aware that their sexuality renders them different (at least in society's eyes), but, to a large extent, they're free of the knotted layers of guilt, self-pity, and recrimination that marked American homosexual culture when it was still in the closet. And so they can meld with their roles in a way that earlier generations of gay fantasists didn't dare.

In *Paris Is Burning*, the role models—the people everyone wants to be—are not outside; they're shockingly life-size. The categories of drag aren't even limited to cross-dressing. Many of the contestants dress up as male archetypes—a businessman in a three-piece suit, say, or a military officer. In this post-Warholian universe, the images of

glamour haven't been molded primarily by movies or even by rock & roll but by advertising—by the capitalistic media culture of the '80s. The inner-city ball participants still dream of being stars, only now their idols are fashion models such as Iman or Paulina Porizkova, or filthy-rich fantasy figures like *Dynasty's* Alexis Carrington, or the sort of generically sexy types who show up in TV commercials and magazine ads. These kids belong to a new, cool breed of existential gender-benders. They want to be beautiful and they want to be rich, and the way they see it, the two states have become virtually inseparable.

Paris Is Burning is the

most passionately empathetic piece of documentary filmmaking I've seen since *Streetwise*, the brilliant 1985 portrait of homeless teens in Seattle, and *The Decline of Western Civilization Part II* (1988), Penelope Spheeris' sly and galvanizing heavy-metal collage. In a way, *Paris* is a cross between those two films—a tale of dispossessed youth taking refuge in their own narcissism. The movie is riveting simply for the details it provides of the drag-ball subculture—the postmodern slang, the voguing duels (which, prior to Madonna's sugarcoated appropriation, were essentially gang fights turned into self-referential dance contests), the tensions between ridicule and reverence that render the balls themselves a kind of proletarian performance art. What makes all of this indelible is the people we meet: the funny and self-mocking "legend" Pepper LeBeija; the supermodel wannabe Octavia Saint Laurent, who flashes a ravishing smile; and, most hauntingly, the innocent and sultry teen prostitute Venus Xtravaganza, who, with his doomed dreams of middle-class bliss (and of finally getting a sex change), is like a Dickensian waif turned into a surreal emblem of late-20th-century yearning. **A**