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Into the Vibe of House Dance

New social dances have always influenced stage dance—here’s one film that takes you into clubs where House style creates communities of creative individuals who “check their bodies at the door”

by Waeli Wang

Check Your Body at the Door is a documentary that serves a slice of the underground-club House dance scene in the 1990s, following New York City club dancers into “the vibe.” Dance scholar and producer Sally R. Sommer describes “the vibe” as “a communal force, a feeling, a rhythm that is created by the mix of dancers, the balance of loud music, the effects of darkness and light, the energy. Everything interlocks to produce a powerful sense of liberation.” Reflecting the principle of community built on diversity, this vibe is continually described by dancers in the film as a utopian escape from the nine-to-five grind of their everyday lives. Dance comes first for these beautiful creatures of the night, as the film explores a world where clubs are their sanctuaries.

House dance is an electric style of dance formed in the underground scene by its community of dancers. These dancers didn’t train in traditional dance studios but rather at home, in the club, or in an elevator, Brahm’s “Bravo” LaFortune does in the film. Wherever there is a modicum of space, you dance. Serving as the central narrator, master House dancer Archie Burnett recounts how he practiced in the same spot in front the mirror of his family living room until he wore a hole into the rug. The dancers are often seen in the middle of energized movements, rhythmically painting the beats of the music with their bodies. Sommer depicts House dance as larger-than-life movement style that is confined to small spaces, with each individual dancer bringing their own flavor into the mix.

Incorporating all kinds of inspiration is a mark of House dance. Burnett tells the stories of different dancers, citing where they got inspiration—from capoeira, martial arts, disco, and salsa. There is a sense of unity and togetherness that House dance draws upon, with improvisation and freedom of movement at its core. Unlike the ciphers of hip hop or breaking, there is no competition, no judgment on the dance, though House can incorporate dance vocabulary from those styles. The phrase “check your body at the door” means leaving attitudes (as well as weapons) outside the club. The mental and physical practice of checking your body at the door is a way to bring in the House ideals of inclusivity and peace. By checking “bodies” at the door, the only identifier that is left is the dance.

One of the featured dancers in the documentary comments on how people don’t see House dance as “real dance,” which poses the question, “Well what is ‘real dance’?” The legitimacy of street styles is often met with resistance because of the non-codified techniques utilized in the social dance realm. We learn that each House dancer has their own dance vocabulary and distinct voice that they embody in an effort to pay homage to their backgrounds and inspirations. The documentary highlights clubheads gathered in open circles, radiating energy and connection between each other as another individual enters the circle to set free their dancing. The vast diversity in House dance is seen in its amalgamation of different movement expressions and the way participants accept and encourage these differences. Fast footwork, acrobatic flips, and movements that undulate through the spine are all a part of House. Brian

“Footwork” Green reveals that he had scholarships to The Ailey School and the Joffrey Ballet School but chose House dance as a more exact expression of himself.

Underground-club House dancing is where Sommer finds a community that defines themselves through their dancing. The documentary upturns the stereotypes of what clubbing looks like and reveals that House dancers are at the club to fully immerse themselves in the *dance*. House mirrors the historical trend of social dance in America in which a dance genre created within marginalized communities is then spread into the mainstream. You can now see glimpses of House dance in music videos, on concert dance stages and being taught in the studio. Self-taught House masters like Burnett get the opportunity to teach the next generation this set of dance vocabularies originating from club settings.

Dance majors in universities can watch this documentary as a source of inspiration for their own dance vocabulary development. By learning “outside” movement forms and bringing them into the studio, they can create more spaces of inclusivity. *Check Your Body at the Door* and House dance itself promote community and diversity; dance creativity benefits from this sharing of House dance histories, bringing to light what previously existed solely in the dark of the club.

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Waeli Wang is a dancer/choreographer now in her second year of MFA studies at University of California, Irvine. Her thesis will explore Asian American experience through personal, familial, social, and artistic contexts, using a critical-theoretical art-making model that engages issues of racism and representation.

