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Paris Is Burning

USA 1990

Director: Jennie Livingston

Certificate

Not yet issued

Distributor

ICA

Production Company

Off White Productions
With financial assistance from National Endowment for the Arts/Jerome Foundation/New York State Council on the Arts/New York Foundation for the Arts/Paul Robeson Fund/Edelman Fund/Art Matters Inc/BBC Television

Executive Producers

Davis Lacy
Nigel Finch

Producer

Jennie Livingston

Co-producer

Barry Swimar

Associate Producers

Claire Goodman
Meg McLagan
Additional:
Richard Dooley

Production Co-ordinator

Elise Pettus

Production Manager

Natalie Hill

Director of Photography

Paul Gibson

In colour

Camera Operators

2nd Unit:

Mayrse Alberti
Additional:
William Megalos
Frank Prinzi
Alyson Denny
Ben Speth

Graphic Design

Jim Rogula
Anne Dutlinger

Editors

Jonathan Oppenheim
Additional:
Kate Davis

Associate Editor

Carol Hillson

Music Extract

"Triumphal March"
by Giuseppe Verdi,
performed by
H. J. Walther and the
Festival Symphony
Orchestra

Songs

"Silent Morning" by
and performed by Noel
Pagan; "Who's Zoomin'
Who" by Narada
Michael Walden,
performed by Aretha
Franklin; "Love is the
Message" by Kenneth
Gamble, Leon Huff,
performed by MFSB;
"Love Hangover" by
Pam Sawyer, Marilyn
McLeod, performed
by Diana Ross; "Move
Your Body" by and
performed by Marshall
Jefferson; "Let No Man
Put Asunder" by Bruce
Gray, Bruce Hawes,
performed by First
Choice; "Got To Be
Real" by David Foster,
Cheryl Lynn, David
Paich, performed by
Cheryl Lynn; "The
Show" by R. Walters,
D. Davis, performed
by Doug E. Fresh and
The Get Fresh Crew;
"Love's Theme" by and
performed by Barry
White; "Sundance"
by and performed by
Kitaro; "Never Never
Gonna Give You Up"
by Barry White,

performed by Love
Unlimited Orchestra;
"Sweet Dreams
(Are Made of This)"
by Annie Lennox,
David A. Stewart,
performed by
Eurythmics; "Is It
All Over My Face?" by
Arthur Russell, Steve
D'Aquisto, performed
by Loose Joints; "I'll
House You" by P. Hall,
M. Smalls, S. Burwell,
performed by Jungle
Brothers; "I Am What
I Am" by Jerry Herman,
performed by Carmen
and Brooke; "Deep in
Vogue" by Malcolm
McLaren, David Lebolt,
performed by Malcolm
McLaren and the
Bootzilla Orchestra;
"Another Man is
Beating My Time"
by Butch Ingram,
performed by Barbara
Mason; "Over the
Rainbow" by E. Y.
Harburg, H. Arlen,
performed by
Patti LaBelle

Titles

Borden Elniff

Opticals

Eastern Optical EFX
inc Cynosure

Sound Editor

Stacia Thompson

Sound Recordists

Catherine Calderon
Judy Karp
Additional:
Etienne Sauret
George Leong
J.T. Takagi
Scott Breindel
Stanley Nelson
James Adner
Mayrse Alberti
Jennie Livingston
Sound Re-recordists
Matt Skilton
Rick Dior
Sound Transfers
Sound One

Cast

Carmen and Brooke

Andre Christian

Dorian Corey

Paris Dupree

Pepper Labelija

Junior Labelija

Willi Ninja

Sandy Ninja

Kim Pendavis

Freddie Pendavis

Sol Pendavis

Avis Pendavis

Octavia Saint Laurent

Stevie Saint Laurent

Angie Xtravaganza

Bianca Xtravaganza

Danny Xtravaganza

David Xtravaganza

David Ian Xtravaganza

David, The Father

Xtravaganza

Venus Xtravaganza

**And all of the legendary
children and upcoming
legends**

7,020 feet

78 minutes

New York, 1987. On a hot summer's night, two teenage boys stand outside a small Harlem community hall, watching young men bustle inside. It's ball night and the men – all gay blacks – are preparing to 'walk the ball' in the hope of winning a trophy. Like the regular beauty contests that these drag balls are modelled on, this is a fiercely competitive affair. The contestants are all members of 'Houses', small gay gangs with names like Ninja, Xtravaganza, Labelija and Pendavis. The house members ('children') compete for the glory of their house, entering or 'walking' in categories that range from the traditional – evening wear, sports wear and town and country – to the more idiosyncratic – Butch Queen First Time In Drag, Wall Street Executive, Bangee (neighborhood thug/drug dealer) Boy. Striking catwalk poses in 'voguing', they strive for 'realness' – that is, the quality of passing for something they're not.

We move from the ball to the apartments of veteran voguers Dorian Corey, Pepper Labelija and Angie Xtravaganza, who provide a history of the ball scene. Younger members like Venus Xtravaganza, Octavia Saint Laurent, Kim Pendavis, Carmen and Brooke provide insights into further categories of realness, and talk about their lives and their hopes for the future. Venus, a petit(e) blonde halfway through a sex change, longs for a husband, children and enough money to remove the "little secret" between his/her legs. Octavia is observed window-shopping at *haute couture* stores. Willi Ninja, a champion vogue dancer, is seen giving deportment lessons to (real) girls. 1989: the voguing scene has come overground; white, moneyed visitors from the real fashion world drop in on a benefit ball. The two teenage boys, whom we now know to be lovers, bid us goodbye. A postscript reveals that Venus was murdered soon after filming ended.

When Jennie Livingston's documentary about Harlem's gay ball scene opened as a 58-minute video at New York's New Festival of Gay and Lesbian Film in 1990, it was instantly recognised as a masterpiece of under-world reportage. And not just within the gay culture. Bounced up from 16mm form, with added credits, a flash-card guide to the ball vocabulary and a killer soundtrack of disco hits, the film scooped the kind of awards that its voguing heroes would die for. At New York's Film Forum, it ran for a record-breaking 17 weeks in 1991. In Britain too, where a truncated version was screened on BBC TV's *Arena* in 1990, it provoked strong reactions and high ratings.

This is a satisfying success. The release of Livingston's film was roughly contemporary with the discovery of the underground ball scene by the pop world, as commemorated on records like Madonna's 'Vogue' and Malcolm McLaren's 'Deep In Vogue'. Although the latter actually used ball world personnel – Willi Ninja featured in



Luscious bodies: Dorian Corey, Pepper LaBeija

McLaren's video and was flown all over the world to promote the record – it was obvious that both stars were only temporary sojourners on a souvenir hunt. Livingston makes it quite clear that the world of *Paris* is one filled with complex messages that require a more careful analysis than pop appropriation can provide.

The business of decoding these messages and locating the issues at play makes for the film's enduring fascination. If this were just another film about cross-dressing men, it would at best be camp, at worst a piece of material for trainee psychiatrists. But it's not. With their houses and their language, the ball queens have responded to economic and social exclusion by creating a community that's fabulous in every sense of the word. In real terms, the ball queens have so much of nothing it defies imagination. Their life stories are a litany of poverty, parental rejection, homelessness. One queen dreams of looking "as well as a white person", others want to be women, a few want to be mothers and live in the country. Once you accept that their commonality lies in the refuge of fantasy, then anything goes. "O-P-U-L-E-N-C-E!" sings out one ball queen. "You own everything! Everything is yours!"

And indeed, much of what these self-scripted starlets say is immensely funny. Their specialised vocabulary (which would put *Wayne's World* to shame) commands special attention. Kim Pendavis explains 'mopping' (stealing a dress); Willi is an expert in 'reading' and 'throwing shade' on the dance floor – that is, copying someone's moves and criticising them. All the 'children' long to be 'legendary' and all strive for the elusive quality of 'realness'. Realness certainly has to do with passing oneself off as the perfect mannequin, in the guise of executive, playboy or hoodlum; but not far beneath its surface lies a combination of mockery and the desire for

acceptance by affluent society. Most importantly, realness is about survival in a homophobic world. "When [a queen] can go out in sunlight, still have her clothes on and get home with no blood, then that femme queen is real".

Livingston's method of weaving the ball, street and interview footage into a coherent and flowing whole is audaciously simple. Some 20 phrases flashed up on screen – Bangee! Luscious Body! Pig Latin! – announce the film's editorial structure. Each phrase is defined, elaborated and activated in ensuing shots. The careful segues between sections establish a fluid momentum in which very little intervention is necessary; Livingston never appears as interlocutor although her presence is very much felt through her choice of material. Livingston, on record as a lesbian of German Jewish extraction, finds in the ball scene men marginalised through race and sexuality. Her implicit message – one which should be heard by us all – is that the benefits of community are underlined by its role as protection against outside threats. Short of the ritualised combats of the ball-walking scenes, violence is off-screen, out there and completely real. The ball queens inhabit a dangerous world.

If the wit, glamour and mind-boggling outfits of *Paris Is Burning* are disarming, not far beneath the film's surface is an immensely moving quality. Watching the sublimely elegant Willi teaching a class of slouchy (real) girls a feminine deportment is hilarious, but the outside world intrudes in a more insidious way. Venus' death (presumably at the hands of a client who discovered her secret) is bad enough; but realising that no amount of ballroom realness can get these voguing 'executives' off the Harlem catwalks and onto Wall Street itself is quietly heart-breaking.

Louise Gray