Scene from Paris is Burning.

Butch Queens in Drag: Issues of Race and Gender

CHRIS CAVANAGH

Vogue. Vogue. Vogue. For most of us, these words echoing in Madonna's Top Ten song and the movements flashed on MTV were an introduction to a form of dance which found its 15 minutes of fame in mainstream America. But like things that find their way into pop culture, what you get is watered down without any reference to the socio and economic history from which it emerged. Vogueing began in the 1960s in Harlem where Black and Latino transvestites parodied Seventh Avenue by calling their clubs "Houses," and holding balls that featured the stylized movement. Appropriating and subverting the fashion dictates and model poses featured in Vogue magazine, the balls became a forum for competition between various houses—the House of Saint Laurent, the House of Xtravaganza and the House of Ninja to name just a few. It is this world and the people who inhabit it that are chronicled in first-time producer and director Jennie Livingston's documentary **Paris Is Burning.**

Shot entirely in black and white, the film uses the terminology of the balls to provide narrative structure. Ball language—Realness, Legendary and House—is flashed on the screen followed by ball footage and interviews with the participants. The editing is quick and snappy; the camera never lingers longer than necessary to explain or provide insight.

Candid interviews provide the real glue of the film. Included in the cast of characters are Pepper Labeija and Dorian, two wise "mothers" who have seen and been through it all. Juxtaposed with these sages are Octavia and Venus, two ultra-feminine young queens or "ball children" who desperately cling to the small fame they've achieved in the ball world. These people don't apologize, nor do they preach. In fact, their straightforward warmth, humor and honesty is endearing and one of the surprises of the film.

If Livingston had merely fashioned a voyeuristic piece, we could observe and dismiss. But she has achieved more; **Paris Is Burning** speaks directly to each and every one of us about finding our place in the world—about fitting in and about belonging.

The people of the ball world, disadvantaged economically, socially and sexually attempt to reconcile their reality with the myth of the American Dream—unwittingly, though, Pepper and Dorian, Octavia and Venus reveal the fragility and superficiality of that dream.

Paris Is Burning will be shown on May 18-19 at 2 pm at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, New York City. The film will appear nationally in major theaters this summer.

Chris Cavanagh works in publicity for Orion pictures and believes that women should rule the world.

FILM