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VQFF 2016: Strike a Pose allows Madonna's dancers to tell the real truth or dare

by Craig Takeuchi on August 16th, 2016 at 2:27 PM

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Strike a Pose takes an indepth look into the lives of Madonna's dancers from her Blond Ambition tour.

***Strike a Pose* (Netherlands/Belgium)**

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Although the nexus of this film is voguing, don't expect this to be a beat-driven, visually indulgent escapade.

Instead, it's an often quiet, reflective, and poignant look at the lives of the seven dancers assembled for Madonna's pivotal 1990 *Blond Ambition* world tour in the wake of her groundbreaking "Vogue" video and single.

This is not a celluloid celebration of the dance craze or music. Instead, the film pulls back the curtain to reveal what was really happening behind the scenes, and to explore the fallout after the glamorous—and often illusionary—lights faded.

In fact, this is perhaps the real version of Madonna's 1991 documentary *Truth or Dare*, as each of the dancers gets the chance to tell their story, not hers.

What we discover is that while on stage, Madonna and the show brought gay culture to the mainstream, the dancers were often conflicted, some uncomfortable with being publicly out, others hiding their HIV-positive status.

Their personal stories contrast with the pop star's brazenness, and her tour theme "Express yourself". They elucidate the nuances and complexities of how her show and documentary—including an onscreen man-on-man kiss—forced some of the dancers out of the closet against their will. While they admit she did fill a maternal role for the men, and the group did form a family, their relationship with her was clearly a complicated one.

As interviewees, the dancers also provide social context for the pop cultural phenomenon, as it was an era in the chilling onset of the AIDS and HIV epidemic and homophobia was much more entrenched than it is today.

Three of Madonna's dancers (featured in *Strike a Pose*) are shown here during the time of her 1990 *Blond Ambition* tour.

What's more, three of the dancers launched a lawsuit against her and many have never seen her in person since that time period. Her lack of participation in the film—and their lives—also says something through absence.

On the other hand, they also recognize the powerful impact of their participation, as they relate stories from fans, many of whom were living in an era prior to the internet and had never seen gay men or gay kissing on screen before.

Yet the men all endured their own struggles, from excessive partying and addiction to the death of one of the dancers, Gabriel, whose mother tells the toll the experience took on him.

When the group gathers again for the first time in years, it's like a high school reunion. Sober, aging, and wisened from experience, the men speak thoughtfully about the opportunity they were given, and take responsibility for their own actions and lives.

Although the quietness of the film is at times almost frustrating in its reluctance to convey the energy, vitality, and power of the dance, highly observant details, such as Gabriel's mother sighing as she watches a clip of *Truth or Dare*, convey a great deal without words.

The thoughtful approach by cordirectors Ester Gould and Reijer Zwaan bestows respect upon its seven subjects, something that had been a long time coming.

Strike a Pose - VQFF 2016



***Strike a Pose* screens at the **Vancouver Queer Film Festival** on Wednesday (August 17) and Friday (August 19).**

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