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VQFF 2016: Kiki gives voice to the LGBT youth of New York City's vibrant Kiki scene

by [Craig Takeuchi](#) on August 20th, 2016 at 9:45 PM



The documentary *Kiki* explores the issues faced by the LGBT youth who populate the NYC Kiki scene.

Voguing and waacking have been experiencing a resurgence in pop culture internationally. There's been the Ukrainian synthpop boyband-in-heels Kazaky; France's Yanis Marshall, Arnaud, and Medhi slaying it on *Britain's Got Talent* in heels; and the woman who brought voguing to the mainstream, Madonna, picking up Japanese dance duo AyaBambi as her latest fashion accessories.

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Accordingly, dance has also made a major splash at this year's Vancouver Queer Film Festival from local vogue troupe House of La Douche at the opening gala to the documentary *Strike a Pose*, about Madonna's dancers from her Blond Ambition tour to a Prance Hall party.

And so, to close things out appropriately, there's the documentary *Kiki*.

The film, by Sara Jordanö and Twiggy Pucci Garçon, takes viewers into the flamboyant, exuberant, and competitive Kiki scene of New York City in a way that mirrors its subject matter. The meandering structure remains loose and organic, with interviewees coming and going, offering snippets of their lives, all contributing to an authentic feel for what this scene is all about.

It's like the ballroom events themselves: vibrant, hyper-energetic, noisy, seemingly messy, but with an underlying system and organization that becomes apparent over time. The dancers belong to houses, or teams, as they compete for prizes at ballroom competitions where they walk and dance for judges in fantastical outfits.

Footage of the competitions are interspersed throughout as each interviewee tells their story: coming out as gay or trans, the struggles they faced with their families or in school, and the struggles they continue to face.

This subculture of the Harlem drag circuit is where LGBT youth find validation, support, vitality, and escape from the troubles of the real world. Those troubles form the majority of the focus of the film: being harassed by police, being harassed for being trans, being pressured into trans sex work due to few to no options, the economic struggles of their communities. The subject of HIV and death eventually arises, as does the realization of aging and that the scene can't sustain them forever.

The coming-out stories are a good primer for viewers unfamiliar with LGBT issues, but they eventually become repetitive and may be old hat to most queer viewers. Also, the lack of a clear narrative direction and interviewees not being clearly introduced can lead to some confusion and loss of momentum. However, the main focus is on what is said, not necessarily who's who.

Ultimately, it's the power of how the Kiki scene empowers, emboldens, and ignites its participants, who are all facing racial, gender, and sexual discrimination, to transcend all that while declaring to the world: "I am beautiful. No matter what you say."

***Kiki* screens at the Vancouver Queer Film Festival's closing gala on Sunday (August 21) at 7 p.m. at the Vancouver Playhouse.**

You can follow Craig Takeuchi on Twitter at twitter.com/cinecraig or on [Facebook](#). You can also follow the Straight's LGBT coverage on Twitter at twitter.com/StraightLGBT or on [Facebook](#).

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