

Exploring homosexual subcultures



Possibly the most beautiful man in the world — Femme Queen Octavia Saint Laurent

Chapel Hill reacts to gay ball documentary

RAHUL MEHTA
Staff Writer

Paris is Burning is hot, sizzling with the emotion of inner-city gay fantasies of success and acceptance, cooled only by the chilling reality of a homophobic society unwilling to aid in the realization of these dreams.

Lesbian director Jennie Livingston's cutting documentary of gay balls and the gay culture in Harlem, *Paris*, is a powerful inferno that burns through gay stereotypes and homophobic tendencies, consuming any viewer who happens to stumble into the showing with a closed mind or closed heart.

The film played to a sellout crowd at the Varsity Theatre Friday night at midnight as a benefit for the HOPE (Helping Our People Everywhere) Fund, an AIDS support service at North Carolina Memorial Hospital. At \$7 per ticket, over 230 tickets were sold, and including poster sales, about \$1,700 was raised for the HOPE Fund, Richard Hess, Varsity assistant manager, said. The film opens for general showing Sept. 27 at regular admission prices.

The benefit drew a primarily homosexual male audience, Chapel Hill resident Todd (not his real name) said, noting that "Anyone who's any-

one (in the gay community) is here tonight."

"It's not often that the gay community gets a chance to get together like this," he said. "Look at all these straight people walking by saying, 'What movie is this!'"

After a "socialization" period of about 45 minutes during which champagne, fresh fruit and chocolate were served, the movie began a little before 1 a.m. The documentary delved almost immediately into shocking scenes of the decadent world of the gay balls.

As men slinked around in silk designer eveningwear, wiggling their hips and flaunting their "breasts," it was easy to forget that these *femme fatales* weren't strutting down Paris runways but rather on the floors of a filthy Elk's Lodge in the heart of Harlem. It was even easier to forget that after winning a trophy for *realness* or beauty and having a shot at *legendary* status, many of these men had no homes to go back to — after setting Paris on fire there was little for them to do but go back to the cold reality of homelessness, or at the very least loneliness in a frigid, self-obsessed society.

In addition to the *femme queen* category, there were categories for gay men dressed as school boys/girls, Wall Street executives, military ser-

vicemen, in short, anything they couldn't be in real life. In an essay about making the documentary, Livingston comments on the irony of "imitating the very people who were excluding them."

"There was an intense irony at work here," she writes, "as people expressed themselves by imitating a world that, if given half a chance, would spit on Black and Hispanic gays or at best ignore them."

However, there is a sort of hope for the gay Harlem culture. Explained as "gay street gangs," *houses* and *house mothers* provide a positive society for drag ball participants. House mothers, *legendary* drag queens, form houses named after famous designers or other aspects of pop culture (such as the House of Saint Laurent or the House of Xtravaganza.) These houses compete as a sort of team at the balls and provide a "family" of "kids" that stick by each other, complete with "mother" and all.

So inspired by this concept of a positive gay society, area drag performer Pureena Chow (real name: Coleman Temple) dubbed herself at Friday night's showing house mother of the newly-formed House of Chow.

When in drag the male performers refer to themselves in the feminine. The 28-year-old Durham resident is hoping to start having gay drag balls

in the area. "If you're unique and different you tend to get things done," Chow said. "People stop and listen just to find out what's coming out of that strange thing."

Pureena is quite aware that people look at her as a "freak." In her "high camp" drag, pillow-stuffing breasts and nicely-curved pillow buttocks, Pureena doesn't see how they could see her as anything else.

"I don't enjoy dressing like a woman," Pureena said. "It's purely a stage thing."

But she does feel strongly about giving the gay community in the area something positive like a drag ball.

"Most people can't understand what it's like for these people to walk a ball, win a trophy and be somebody, God give them grace," she said. "(The movie) makes people aware of what these people will do for a moment of glory."

"I think people should see the movie just to understand what some people do to achieve some sort of success, a star status, regardless of the oppression and prejudice that may be keeping them where they are," she said.

But she doesn't really expect anyone to be changed by the movie. "Prejudice will never end," she said. "People teach their children the

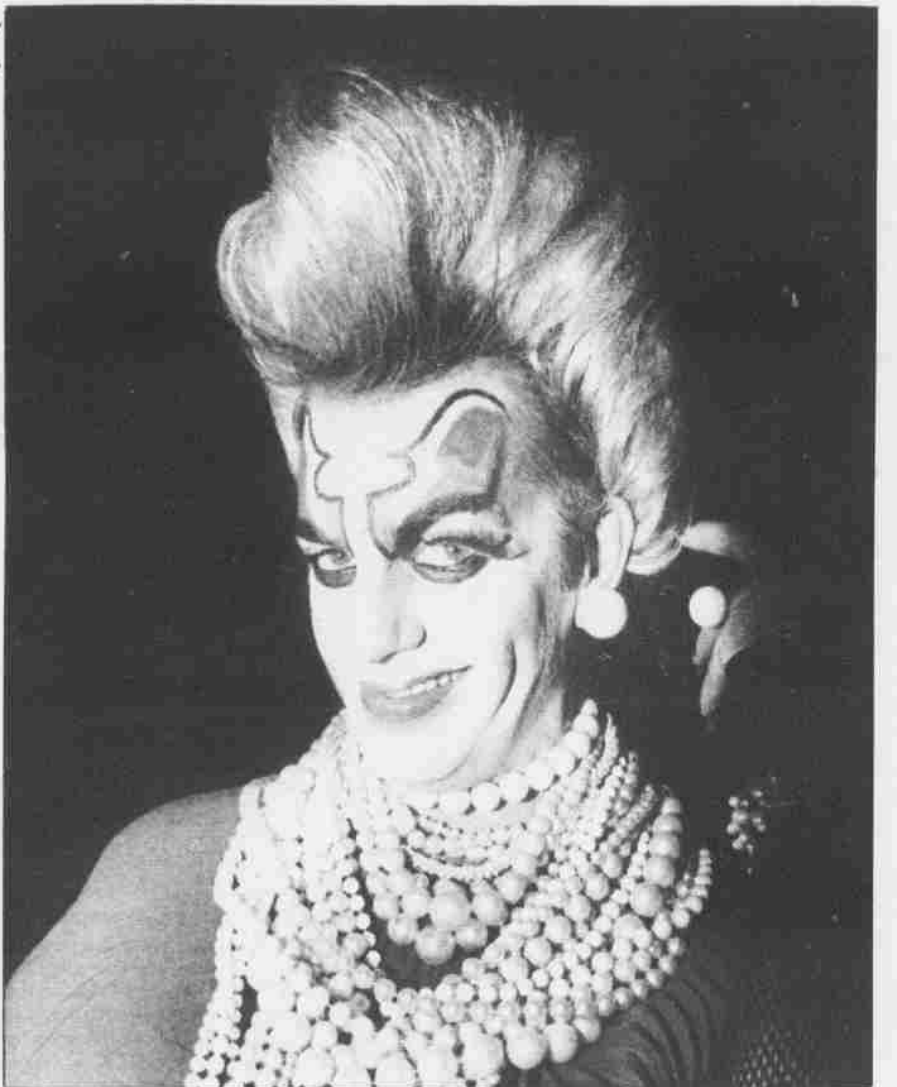
wrong way to think."

Still others are more optimistic. Senior Joe Smith, an economics and public policy double major and co-chair of the CGLA, said that *Paris* "enlightens" viewers about the "search for self-esteem that gay people need to fulfill."

Senior English education major Eric Houck said that seeing the dramatically tragic and remarkable lives of gay men in inner-cities helps viewers when they encounter more mainstream gay people.

"Whenever you deal with the extreme of any belief, you automatically have a better understanding of the moderate view," Houck said. "By being thrown into the extreme of gay lifestyle you get a better understanding of moderate gay life."

Optimism aside, if the people passing by outside the theater shouting comments like "Okay, where are the transvestites" or "I must be tripping," protecting their girlfriends from the "freaks" lined up on the sidewalk, are any indication of the reception the documentary will receive, it's hard to tell whether it will have any sort of impact at all. Perhaps *Paris* is simply too hot to handle and viewers, rather than working to extricate any sort of insight or understanding, will decide it's much easier just to get out of the kitchen.



Miss Pureena Chow, Mother of the House of Chow, displays her first-place costume at the opening night of 'Paris'

Glossary of voguing terms

BALL — A type of fashion show originating in Harlem, where minority men and women compete for trophies in a variety of categories.

BUTCH QUEEN — A masculine gay man; in ball terminology, a man who competes in men's clothing.

CATEGORY — A division of competition at a ball. Categories for both Butch Queens and Femme Queens include: Sports-wear, Eveningwear, Schoolboy/Schoolgirl Realness, Executive Realness and Military Realness; other categories include Muscular Body (Butch Queens only) Luscious Body and Model-type Body (Femme Queens only) Best Dressed Butch (for masculine lesbians) and Best Dressed Woman (for feminine women, gay or straight).

CHILDREN — The younger ball-walkers, or members of a House.

EXECUTIVE REALNESS — Category in which walkers wear business suits, carry briefcases and copies of *The Wall Street Journal*. Detail is important: briefcases may contain real plane tickets and charge cards.

FEMME QUEEN — In ball terminology, a man who competes in women's clothing. Often these men dress as women in their daily lives. Various surgical improvements are not uncommon.

HOUSE — An organization of ball-walkers, a gay street gang. Houses can be named after a designer, as in House of Chanel; after a House founder or Mother, as in House of Labeija; or simply for impact, as in House of Ninja. Houses provide support for the ball-walkers in preparing for competition, and serve as surrogate families for younger members who are orphaned or rejected by their

families.

LEGENDARY — Noteworthy in the ball world, winner of many trophies, as "The Legendary Dorian Corey" or "Pepper Labeija, Legendary Mother of the House of Labeija".

LUSCIOUS BODY — A category for fat, curvaceous, sexy Femme Queens; also billed as "Femme Queen — 300 Pounds and Over", proving that ball standards don't always adhere to conventional ideals of feminine beauty.

MOTHER — A leader, often founder of a House, either Butch or Femme Queens. Mothers must be very talented, popular, hard-working and wise and compassionate. A Mother acts as surrogate parent to her Children both in and out of competition.

READING — The act of verbally abusing, criticizing and humiliating a competitor or rival in a witty and stylish manner; having a "reading session".

REALNESS — In ball categories, the ability to pass as something you are not, as in poor for rich, male for female, gay for straight. In life, Realness can be a matter of survival, as passing for straight to avoid homophobic violence.

VOGUEING — A ball category in which dancers recreate the poses of models, integrating acrobatic moves and complex expressive gestures. Named for the magazine.

WALK — In ball terminology, to compete, as to "walk a ball". Walking the balls is to House Children what street fighting is to gangs.

WORK — In ball terminology, a term of encouragement shouted during competition, as "Work, Miss Pepper, work!"



A group of ball-walkers, most of whom have already achieved Legendary or House Mother status, who serve as role-models for children of their Houses and Upcoming Legends

Out of the theater and into your neighborhood

JAY CARDO
Staff Writer

Four homosexual men walk into a Roy Rogers burger shack in New York City under the scrutiny of a documentary camera recording them for the startling new film *Paris is Burning*. One man saunters over to the camera, which focuses between the heads of an elderly white couple, and exclaims in a lilting falsetto, "Look, they put cheese on the meat!"

The look that couple shared at that moment expresses perfectly the shock this film hopes to generate. Actually, though, the reaction seemed less one of shock and more like these people's brains had been sucked out by this homosexual phenomenon so counter to their entire sense of reality.

Give it a rest, Mom and Pop America! These guys are just gay, not alien, threatening or infectious! Essentially, that admonition becomes the core message of *Paris is Burning*. The movie seeks to prove that deprived, gay, black and Hispanic men in New York City could rise to achieve anything in this world if they were only given the chance. Their medium of expression? An acrobatic, flashy dance known as "Voguing."

"Voguing is a way of expressing

yourself in dance ... a way to tell the person you are dancing with what you want them to know about you," said 22-year-old Rick Burwell, a 1991 UNC graduate. In this way, local Voguing differs slightly from the dances in *Paris is Burning*, which has contestants competing for prestige and trophies for the honor of their House in addition to seeking a sense of personal satisfaction.

Amid protests from homophobic friends and family, I ventured to The Club on Franklin Street one Thursday night in an attempt to see just what this Voguing really is. Were there homosexuals there? Yes. Did they bother me, harass me, hit on me? No.

"Just look around, man," said Eric Zollicoffer, the 1990 graduate who was feeding me Rolling Rocks from behind the bar, "it's straight here most nights. There are straight people here now." Having gotten momentarily lost in my notebook and/or beer bottle for about ten minutes, I turned back towards the dance floor and saw the homosexual couples I had seen dancing before but a number of heterosexual couples who had moved in as well.

"Eventually you start to get the outer fringes of Bohemian society attending these Vogue balls. The hip

people become involved with this practice, and soon it's co-opted into just another dance. And that phenomenon is as old as society itself," professed visiting RTVMP lecturer Brian Austin from the University of Texas at Austin. Now wait just a minute, there! He couldn't possibly be saying that some of the homosexual subculture might be drifting into our ever so sacrosanct heterosexual world, could he? Surely that Madonna song "Vogue" has nothing whatsoever to do with these gays dancing in drag, right? Heads up, passers-by, I have a premonition that some insulted boys and girls from our nationally infamous Bible Belt will be hurling the tapes and CDs of that gay-embracing Material Girl out of many campus windows any moment.

Such an immediate and closed-minded shunning of homosexuals forms the walls that *Paris is Burning* attempts to destroy. "In the larger cities like Washington and New York, you don't see the fearful homophobia in heterosexuals, but down here in the South the reaction can be negative, but usually not directly," commented Burwell.

Well, Mr. Burwell probably knows better than I ever could, but in my three-day sojourn into the homosexual community I was witness to

years, "this film might put some pressure on the situation at The Club." With the powerful anti-homophobic message and the resounding approbation it received from the homosexual community at its opening, this film could indeed work wonders for advancing the cause of homosexuals in this area.

Even if, however, the effects amount to naught, the patients and staff in the Infectious Disease wing of the UNC Moore Hospital are thankful for the movie. The benefit showing Friday night supported the H.O.P.E. Fund, which has been loosely described as a Ronald McDonald house for victims of the AIDS virus.

Susie Wilson, the director of Infectious Disease Case management, greeted the sold-out crowd and conveyed the thanks of those patients who were unfortunately unable to attend. The H.O.P.E. Fund works to ease the financial burdens of those suffering from AIDS (not all of whom are homosexual) by helping with rent and insurance and by purchasing medication, equipment and supplies needed for the care of these people.

Perhaps it was Miss Chow who could say it all the best. "Anything else I want to say? Just live and let live, child. What else can you say?"

"Hopefully," said Richard Hess, the assistant manager for the Varsity and a Chapel Hill resident for five