

Paris Is Burning

Michael Warner

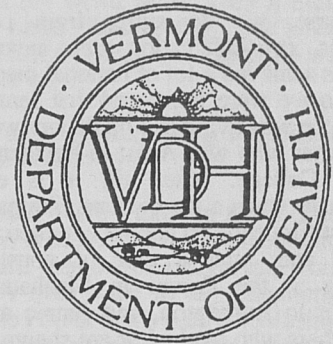
Jennie Livingston's film *Paris is Burning* represents several years of both study and hard work, as well as fund raising. Gleaned from many hours of footage, the final film is a documentary, a testament to a slice of life which is foreign to most. *Paris is Burning* tells its story by following the action and interviewing the participants at various New York City drag balls.

The participants are primarily poor, black, or Hispanic, and young. Livingston shows a poignant, joyous, depressing, even alien side of gay subculture. Going far beyond dressing in drag, many of these young men actually want to become the rich white women they see on television series such as *Dynasty* or walking down Fifth Avenue. Beautiful clothes, jewels, fur, money and femininity for them all symbolize happiness. The film has a lot to do with images and icons which may be taken for granted by mainstream (male/white/heterosexual) society.

Besides simply documenting the balls, the film becomes a study of society, privilege and class. The one category of "drag" which has men dressing up as Wall Street businessman demonstrates that for minority men, the business suit is as much drag as pink chiffon and lace. There are levels of drag as there are levels of society. Some dress to pretend or escape while others dress up to "become." Some indeed almost succeed.

The film is about the complexity of the ball circuit, the balls themselves, the "houses" (which are like gay street gangs), the participants, and their language and culture. But it's also about each of us. The film made me think about the fact that many of us live our lives participating in one form of "drag" or another. Sure it may be one which makes us feel okay about ourselves or successful, but are we truly being ourselves, are we happy, more comfortable? Or are we, too, playing a role, walking the runway? The roles we choose may be those which fit a more socially acceptable mold than the ones portrayed in the film, but who is to say or judge which is better. ▼

For confidential AIDS Information



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