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'Born to Dance': TIFF Review

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Courtesy of Toronto
International Film Festival
'Born to Dance'

The Bottom Line

Energetic moves enliven a familiar formula.

Venue

Toronto International Film Festival (Discovery)

Cast

Tia-Taharoa Maipi, Kherington Payne, Stan Walker

Toronto International Film Festival

Tammy Davis

Tammy Davis' debut feature is an Auckland-set hip-hop drama.

Auckland, New Zealand, may seem a world away from the heart of hip-hop culture in the U.S., but the local dance crews featured in *Born to Dance* totally own it. Actor **Tammy Davis** (*Whale Rider*, *Black Sheep*) gets a major assist on his initial directorial outing from New Zealand's own **Parris Goebel**, a dancer and choreographer whose performance credits include not only *Step Up All In*, but an impressive résumé collaborating with hip-hop divas **Jennifer Lopez**, **Nicki Minaj** and **Janet Jackson**. With an unusual setting, fresh faces and a global form of entertainment at its disposal, *Born to Dance* looks ready to resonate nearly anywhere hip-hop has taken root, which

is pretty much everywhere.

Davis provides a conventional setup as teenager Tu (**Tia-Taharoa Maipi**) discovers that graduating from high school can turn out to be something of a dead end. Stuck in a low-wage job at a recycling center while he tries to dodge his career-military dad's admonitions to join the service, Tu saves his passion for dance rehearsals with his crew of homies known as 2PK, all from the working-class, mostly Maori south side of Auckland. They're preparing for the upcoming national hip-hop competition, where they'll have to challenge current champs K-Crew if they want a shot at making any kind of name for themselves. However, things begin getting complicated for Tu after he's offered a chance to audition for the K-Crew lineup as part of a personnel reshuffling.

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Sneaking behind the backs of his 2PK collaborators and best friends, choreographer Vonnie (**Onyeka Arapai**) and homeboy Benjy (**Stan Walker**), Tu undertakes a grueling rehearsal schedule with the local hip-hop celebrities on the swankier north side of the city. Crew leader Kane (**Jordan Vaha'akolo**) is tough on the recruits, not bothering to hide his contempt for those who can't make the grade and get cut from the tryouts. While trying to keep up with the other newbies, Tu has a hard time keeping his eyes off lead dancer Sasha (**Kherington Payne**), who's also Kane's girlfriend. With the championships just weeks away, pressure steadily builds for Tu, who's not sure what he dreads more: getting dropped from K-Crew auditions or telling his 2PK dancers that he's made the cut.

Screenwriters **Steve Barr**, **Casey Whelan** and **Hone Kouka** don't make much of an effort to disguise their minor variation on the standard coming-of-age template, as Tu struggles to contend with satisfying an overbearing father, resolving contentious friendships and finding a way to attract the cute girl's attention. Their task is readily bolstered by a talented, attractive, primarily Polynesian cast eager to pull out all the stops in an effort to reinvigorate a by-now familiar formula involving battling hip-hop crews.

Newcomer Maipi, a featured dancer with Goebel's renowned Royal Family group, gamely changes things up to take on a dramatic role. Although not perhaps achieving a similar level of accomplishment, he conveys a sense of sincerity sometimes lacking with more experienced actors. Payne, who got her start with regular appearances on *So You Think You Can Dance* and the 2009 *Fame* reboot, makes a better dance partner than a love interest, straining believability with a sometimes awkwardly forced performance.

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Supervising a half-dozen hip-hop crews performing throughout the film, Goebel displays a distinctly dynamic style, but the routines eventually grow repetitive, until the final competition (consuming almost the entire third act) elicits more stylistic variety. Davis relies on dance unit director **Chris Graham** (*Sione's Wedding*) to expertly capture the energetic performance sequences, but otherwise proves quite capable of handling the more dramatic scenes. Kiwi DJ and producer "**P-Money**" **Wadams** scores the film's propulsive beats and incorporates a slew of New Zealand performers on the soundtrack, including supporting castmember and vocalist Walker.



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Production company: Sector 7 Productions

Cast: Tia-Taharoa Maipi, Kherington Payne, Stan Walker, Jordan Vaha'akolo, Onyeka Arapai, Richie Cesan, Michael Metuakore, John Tui

Director: Tammy Davis

Screenwriters: Steve Barr, Casey Whelan, Hone Kouka

Producers: Jill Macnab, Leanne Saunders, Daniel Story

Executive producers: Phil Bremner, Edward Noeltner, Dene Anderberg, Matt Noonan, David Walthall

Director of photography: Duncan Cole

Production designer: Shayne Radford

Costume designer: Kylie Cooke

Editor: Jeff Hurrell

Music: Peter 'P-Money' Wadams

Casting directors: Stu Turner, Hori Ahipene

Sales: Cinema Management Group

No rating, 96 minutes

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