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TIFF15: ‘Born to Dance’ is a delightful Maori Hip Hop Musical about a teenager who’s gotta dance

written by Alex Heeney



Courtesy of TIFF.

If the sub-genre Maori Hip Hop Musical isn't enough of a hook to get you to see "Born to Dance," let me add that it's heaps of fun. Like a cross between "Bring it On" and "Billy Elliot," there's plenty of dance talent on display in this film.

You don't go to musicals for the plot, so the fact that it's flimsy and quickly resolved shouldn't deter anyone's enjoyment. Tu (Tia Maipi) is a Maori teen on the cusp of high school graduation with no plans for the future. His father, a military man, wants Tu to join the army. But Tu, whose lifeblood is dancing, has other plans. He hopes to get a place in the national hip hop competition, proving to his family and himself that doing what he loves is a viable career choice.



Courtesy of TIFF.

Tu spends some time flirting with the idea of joining the recent national champions team, which would require him to abandon his hometown team that he's been practicing with for years. There, he meets his American love interest Sasha (Kherington Payne), who started in ballet but now hopes to make her way in hip hop.

Choreographer Parris Goebel is tasked with creating distinctive dance styles for the national team, for Tu, and for the cobbled-together team of Tu and his misfits — hardly a spoiler, this is how these movies go. Each group's choreography needs to be distinguishable and indicative of the group's character.

The final competition in "Born to Dance" is what the final scene in "Magic Mike XXL" aims to be: pure bliss, but with great dancing by all, not just the star. You can leave behind the inevitable plot clichés, because the last act is pretty much nothing but dancing, which is the reason you're in the cinema anyway.

Though director Tammy Davis uses wide shots at times to allow us to see the dancers' full bodies, he favors more quick cuts, to highlight details in the dance numbers, than I'd prefer — Fred Astaire would be outraged. But by cutting in time with the music, we get the same adrenaline rush as the characters do from the dance numbers. It keeps the film moving at a fast pace, and it draws attention to the intricacies of the choreography.

"Born to Dance" had its World Premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival. It does not yet have North American Distribution.