

## Film Review: 'Born to Dance'



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COURTESY OF TORONTO FILM FESTIVAL

***Director Tammy Davis taps choreographer Parrish Goebel, last seen in 'Step Up All In,' to show the world that they know how to get down Down Under.***

***Peter Debruge (<http://variety.com/author/askdebruge/>)***

Proof that Maori dancers can bust a move with the best of them, “**Born to Dance** (<http://variety.com/t/born-to-dance/>)” serves as an astonishing Kiwi choreography showcase, the biggest and by far more impressive of its kind to originate Down Under, as local star **Tammy Davis** (<http://variety.com/t/tammy-davis/>) — known in New Zealand as Munter of hit skein “Outrageous Fortune,” but more familiar abroad for bigscreen roles in “Whale Rider” and “Black Sheep” — makes his high-energy feature directing debut, following a pair of well-traveled shorts. Casting mostly real dancers and hip-hop personalities in roles that might have benefited from more acting experience, the film pits the country’s best dancers against one another for a fictive version of that title, though it’s the off-the-wall technique (from “Step Up All In” cast mate Parrish Goebel), not the

**boilerplate plotting, that will give this Kiwi sensation international legs.**

Likable upstart Tu (Tia-Taharoa Maipi) holds a dead-end job at a South Auckland recycling center and lives at home with his military dad (John Tui), who gives the kid six weeks to decide what he plans to do with his life before forcing his son to make the safe choice and enlist. As far as Tu is concerned, such a straight-laced father would never understand his Billy Elliott-style dreams, even if he's chosen the butchest dance style there is: Tu rocks out on the streets, making a DIY demo video that goes viral on YouTube — but still won't pay the bills.

Luckily, Tu's dance sampler gets him noticed by three-time national champ Kane (Jordan Vaha'akolo, who actually held that title back in 2008), a tough-acting, win-at-all-costs type scouting for hot new talent to join K-Crew (<http://variety411.com/us/new-york/crew/>). The trouble is, Tu already has a crew of his own, 2PK, and there's no discreet way to go about auditioning for a rival team located on the North Shore (more than a three-hour commute from South Auckland) when your dad, your boss and your fellow dancers are all up in your business. Actually, there is one possibility: If he can convince everybody that he's fallen for a Shore girl, maybe they'll get off his back.

Conveniently enough, the script presents a potential love up there, and just to make things interesting, she also happens to be Kane's girl, Sasha (sexy, slender Kherington Payne, of "Fame" fame), a classically trained New York ballet student who awakens precisely the sort of good-girl/street-thug attraction in Tu that made 2006 American dance hit "Step Up" such a success. Payne has genuine screen presence, while Maipi, though stoically handsome in his own way, is no Channing Tatum.

If "Born to Dance" fails to deliver the infectious re-watchability of such teen-terps phenoms as "Dirty Dancing" and "You Got Served," that has less to do with choreography than chemistry — for the dancing itself is fresh, inventive and terrifically diverse in its style. Maipi, however, is an almost anti-charismatic screen presence: the sort of guy one might expect to find working at a recycling center, not heading up his own crew.

But then, "Born to Dance" does have a few tricks up its sleeve, and while watching the slightly wooden Maipi find his self-confidence may not be one of them, the relatively predictable script pulls off one big twist during the climactic showdown that will impress more than just the judges. Whereas Kane may be all

about ruthless competition, Tu discovers that the rivals recruited to try out alongside him each have incredible skills to offer, and in the film's epic final reel, he forms a new crew called Freaks, giving everyone a chance to show his stuff — including two wicked-synched twins (Starcia and Brooke Oneill, playing themselves) and a gay Asian dancer (Michael Metuakore) with an admirable out-and-proud attitude.

Delivering bass-driven attitude from start to finish, the hot P-Money-produced soundtrack similarly lets foreign auds sample local talent, including new single "Start Again" performed by Stan Walker and (Aussie) Samantha Jade. Walker also plays an overly moralistic supporting role as Tu's pot-dealing best friend, while adding just a bit of grit to the otherwise goody-goody script. While the characters are seen dancing the whole film through, Jeff Hurrell's editing is clearly holding back the full impact of the ensemble's abilities for much of the running time, to the extent that audiences may find themselves questioning whether Tu or Kane can even dance at all. Until the final competition, the only real evidence is a peculiar routine in which they manipulated the hoodies of their uniforms.

Dance unit director Chris Graham clearly takes over for the finale, in which the feel of the film transforms completely, minimizing the backstage drama while letting the dance speak for itself — this time taking full advantage of costumes, lighting and a proper stage, while cut in such a way that the editing compliments the moves, rather than half-hiding them. We've seen this style once before in the film, during a musicvideo-style lead-up sequence in which choreographer Parris fronts an all-girl crew who get right up in the Freaks' faces and, truth be told, out-perform any of the competition [sets \(http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/sets-stages/\)](http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/sets-stages/) to follow. If there's one person who's born to dance in this pic, it's Parris, though she's generous enough to otherwise disappear from screen, coaching her cast mates rather than upstaging them. In the end, it's thanks to her that the world will discover how they get down Down Under.

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Reviewed at Toronto Film Festival (Discovery), Sept. 2015. Running time: **96 MIN.**

### Production

(New Zealand) A Vendetta Films, Severe Features, Storytime Films production, in association with New Zealand Film Commission, New Zealand On Air. (International sales: Cinema Management Group, Los Angeles.) Produced by Jill Macnab, Leanne Saunders, Daniel Story.

Co-producer (<http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/producers/>), Charlotte Larsen. Executive producers, Phil Bremner, Edward Noeltner, Dene Anderberg, Matt Noonan, David Waithall.

## Crew

Directed by Tammy Davis. Screenplay, Steve Barr, Casey Whelan, Hone Kouka. Camera (<http://variety411.com/us/new-york/camera-sound-equipment/>) (color), Duncan Cole; editor (<http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/editors/>), Jeff Hurrell; music, Peter "P-Money" Wadams; production designer, Shayne Radford; costume designer, Kyle Cooke; sound, Adrian Medhurst, Toby Lloyd; sound supervisor, Dick Reade; re-recording mixers, Michael Hedges, Tim Chaproniere; visual effects artist, Chris Williamson; stunt supervisor, Steve McQuillan; supervising choreographer, Parris Goebel; dance unit director, Chris Graham; casting, Stu Turner, Hori Ahipene, Shannon Makhnian.

## With

Tia-Taharoa Maipi, Stan Walker, Kherington Payne, Jordan Vaha'akolo, Michael Metuakore, Omar Nasim, Deana Lao, Nathan Kara, Starcia Oneill, Brooke Oneill, Onyeka Arapai, Caleb Sagala, Daniel Feite, Kirsten Ocampo, Kaea Pearce, Richie Cesan, Carlos Skipper, Kyra Aoake, Joshua Cesan, Lance Savali, Alexandra Carson, John Tui. (English dialogue)

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