

# House and Ball Culture Goes Wide

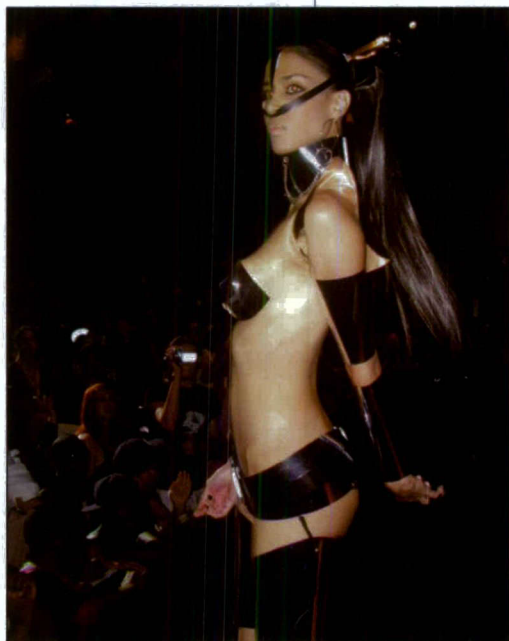
IVAN MONFORTE

COMPOSED PRIMARILY of African-American and Latino people, many or most of them transgendered, the House and Ball community is a system of “houses” that participate in competitive drag balls. Centered in New York City, the houses have names like Xtravaganza, Ninja, LaBeija, the Garavani, and so on, and are organized as “drag families” headed by a “house mother.” It’s a community that’s as amorphous, inclusive, and diverse as any other GLBT (or LGBTQ, etc.) universe. Like other subcultures within the larger subculture of “gaydom,” House and Ball has made direct and indirect contributions to popular culture while simultaneously resisting hegemony and absorption through the use of codified language and organizational structure.

The origins of the House and Ball community in New York City can be traced as far back as 1869 with the female impersonation extravaganzas held at the Hamilton Lodge Ball in Harlem. In *Gay New York* (1994), George Chauncey writes that the event was officially known as the “Masquerade and Civic Ball” and was organized by the Hamilton Lodge No. 710 of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, and was essentially a beauty pageant for female and male impersonators. Within the Harlem community of the 1920’s and 30’s, when the ball would bring in as many as 8,000 spectators from all over the city at its peak, it was simply referred to as the “Faggots Ball.” Tolerated by the community, the ball became a source of both pride and disdain as it grew in popularity. Religious leaders like Adam Clayton Powell attempted to shut it down for its “immorality,” while the local press openly lauded the “gorgeous costumes” worn by the participants on their front pages. Much like the balls of today, it became a space where gender, class, sexuality, and race coalesced and collided for one moment in time.

In the 1970’s, a shift occurred within the scene and the “House” was born and added to the ball. In Frank Simon’s 1968 documentary *The Queen*, one can catch a dramatic glimpse of the origins of this shift. When the Puerto Rican queen Crystal LaBeija loses the “Miss All-American Beauty” title at a ball held in NYC in 1967 to a less-than-perfect white queen by the name

of Harlow, she storms off the stage. Later, we see Crystal in full rage, screaming “I don’t say she’s not beautiful—but she wasn’t looking beautiful tonight! She doesn’t equal me! Look at her make-up—it’s *terrible!*” Frustrated by the ever-present racism in the ball scene, the black and Latino queens began organizing their own balls. Overt, covert, and internalized racism was always part of the ball scene. Time and time again, the white contestants would somehow manage to win over the prettier queens of color. And even the queens of color would contribute to the atmosphere by choosing to emulate white movie stars instead of black and Latina singers and actresses. Dorian Corey encapsulates this phenomenon in Jenny Livingston’s 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning*: “When I grew up ... black stars were stigmatized. Nobody



wanted to look like Lena Horne. Everybody wanted to look like Marilyn Monroe.”

In 1977, Crystal LaBeija changed the entire scene through one simple gesture. According to Michael Cunningham’s short story about Angie Extravangza, “The Slap of Love,” Crystal reportedly credited the organization of a ball she was throwing to “the House of LaBeija” as a promotional gimmick. The term “house” was meant to mimic and emulate the grand fashion houses of Paris and caught on fast. “House” is, in fact, a fairly accurate term to describe the organizational structure of these groups. Like a home, a “house” contains a mother, a father, and some children. The only difference is that the mother and father aren’t necessarily biologically female and male, and members are seldom related by blood. But the bonds of love, trust, and devotion are just as strong, as are the drama, betrayals, and injustices that sometimes occur within families. The children are sometimes from broken homes,

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rejected by their families, communities, and schools because of their sexual and/or gender expressions. Others come from stable homes with a mom and dad, are active in their communities, and teach sixth grade math. The mother and father of the houses help the children navigate the community through the ball system.

The balls of today bear little resemblance to the ones held in the 1930's. No longer a pageant for gender illusionists, they now include categories ranging from intense dance performances and couturier-designed clothes to simply having a pretty face or amazing body. Regardless of the category, the competition is just as intense as in any contest in which creativity, ingenuity, and self-expression are involved. The most coveted categories are rewarded with cash prizes and trophies—as little as \$100 or as much as \$5,000.

Through these competitions and prizes, each house vies for a position within the overall hierarchy. Each house becomes associated with certain attributes, such as the House of Ninja, which is renowned for its double-jointed dancers and for trying to keep the history of dance alive; or the House of Xtravaganza, whose children are reputed to have the prettiest female faces in the scene.



Sometimes these competitions can get physical in all kinds of ways. Certain houses have been known to get violent after losing at a ball. As in most every home in America, drama and intrigue are usually found just below the surface.

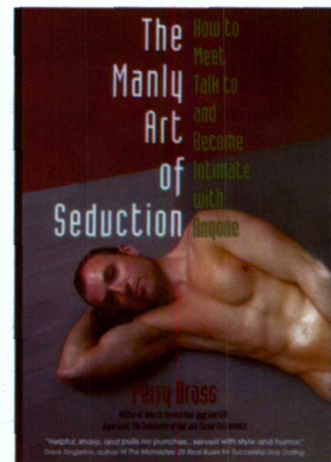
When I worked with homeless and runaway youth at Streetwork Project in New York, I often encountered children at the bottom of the social hierarchy who found acceptance in the House and Ball community through their extraordinary talent at stealing or their ability to walk in "Thug Realness" categories, where the idea is to look like the drug dealer from the corner or that guy who just spent the weekend at Riker's Island. Sadly for them, this wasn't just a performance but something close to their everyday reality. And while some parties sought to exploit these vulnerable young people, others made a concerted effort to involve their children in the issues most affecting their communities.

Gay Men's Health Crisis founded the House of Latex in 1990

in order to address HIV/AIDS in the House and Ball community. Although Latex is no longer a functioning house in the scene, the GMHC hosts what is perhaps the most extravagant ball of the year at the Roseland Ballroom under the name House of Latex Project. Known simply as the "Latex Ball," it has been attended by as many as 5,000 people, functioning as something akin to the Academy Awards for the House and Ball community. Awards are given to members of the community for their contributions to the scene and for their efforts to deal with the prevalence of HIV/AIDS within the House and Ball community. In recent years, such high-profile celebrities as Janet Jackson, Patricia Field, and various personalities from Tyra Banks' show *America's Next Top Model* have made the scene.

In the early 1980's, the House and Ball community was discovered by the burgeoning downtown art and fashion scene in New York. Artists such as Keith Haring and fashion designers such as Patricia Field went so far as to found their own houses. It was a merging of creative forces to give birth to an even more powerful scene for everyone, a byproduct of the free love and drug culture of the 70's. For a brief moment these disparate worlds came together to create a subculture that reflected the decadence, power, and money of the 80's fashion world. That is, until a hitherto unknown and uninvited virus came to the party.

HIV/AIDS had an enormous impact in the community when it arrived early in the decade. Because the transmission of the virus is predominately through sex and drug use, the dialogue around prevention and infection has always danced around topics of education, morality, personal responsibility, and blame. Conse-



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quently, HIV was—and continues to be—seen as something that mostly “bad” people acquire. This stigma filtered into the atmosphere in the House and Ball community where the virus (to change the metaphor) became the elephant in the room that no one at the balls would discuss. At around the same time, the introduction of crack cocaine into the community contributed to the loss of an entire generation from the House and Ball community through morbidity, incarceration, and attrition. The children often found themselves burying their House mothers and fathers and were left to pick up the pieces and endure.

In 1990, an unknown NYU film student named Jenny Livingston released her 71-minute, low-budget documentary titled *Paris Is Burning*, and shone what has perhaps been the strongest spotlight to date on the House and Ball scene. I remember watching Phil Donahue as a youth and hearing the chant “Dorian Corey, Dorian Corey” and watching a large drag queen walk onto the stage in a sequined dress and plumes. It was after-school TV at its best, and for me personally it was as earthshattering as the moment that I first saw Boy George perform on a music video, at the age of ten, in 1983. Phil Donahue spent the rest of the hour introducing the world to the cast of *Paris Is Burning* with his usual enthusiasm, running up and down the aisles to take questions from the audience like, “Were you really born a man?” *Paris Is Burning* went on to win twelve local and international awards, including the Grand Jury Prize at the 1991 Sundance Film Festival, and has grossed almost four million dollars in domestic sales to date. This caused a lot of resentment within the community, which saw a privileged white girl from NYU brazenly filming their intimacies for five years and then snatching all the glory—and money—for herself. Lawsuits ensued with demands for huge sums of money. In the end Livingston distributed \$55,000 to the cast, based upon their time on-screen.

Coincidentally, that same year Madonna released her hit song “Vogue,” which was based on a dance performed by participants in the House and Ball scene. The song went to number one in over thirty countries worldwide, won seven awards—including an American Music Award for best dance single—grossed millions of dollars, and introduced the world to a sanitized and choreographed version of the House and Ball scene. Madonna took two of the most talented dancers from the community, Jose Gutierrez and Luis Camacho, and went on an international tour with them. Interestingly enough, no one from the House and Ball scene ever tried to sue Madonna for the appropriation. However, Horst P. Horst did express his disapproval of her use of an iconic image without his permission.

During this period, the House and Ball community exploded. A dozen or so founding houses turned into dozens of houses around the country, many of which continue to take their names from Parisian fashion houses, such as Mugler and Chanel. Cultural shifts were also taking place. Unlike the balls of the 1930’s, where femininity and whiteness were central elements, masculinity and color entered the scene through the influence of Hip-Hop and urban culture. The children no longer had to turn toward a pretty white lady as a measure of success, but could celebrate and emulate people that looked like them. This has made the House and Ball scene more reflective of popular culture at large and less a subculture living on the margins.

The balls of today include a vast number of categories and reward some of the same things as did the older balls, such as “Fem

Realness,” where the object of the category is to look as passably female as possible. But now they also contain categories such as “Hands Performance,” in which the vogue dance is transformed from a corporeal expression to one contained entirely in the movements of the hands. Even the vogue dance itself has been transformed to one based on elegance and restrained gesture to exaggerated movements that include dips, spins, and the ever-popular shawam, in which the performer literally falls backwards onto the floor in what appears to be a suicidal thrash executed perfectly to the hard beat of a song. This has created an interesting phenomenon in the community in which the relationship between the older and younger generations appears a bit strained. Each generation tends to think that the other “doesn’t get it.” Of course, this phenomenon is nothing new historically. Impressionist painting was at first dismissed by the French Academy as ugly, disgusting, and simply not art.

The most interesting shift for me is the way in which the culture has infiltrated our collective consciousness as gays and lesbians. Aside from the popularization of vogue as a dance form—with the inclusion of the dance crew “Vogue Evolution” in the television show *America’s Next Dance Crew*—the House and Ball community has deeply affected the language we hear and celebrate every day. The codified banter that’s often a hallmark of gay identity—silly, dismissive insults casually tossed about, in which pronouns are actively switched and double and triple entendres are rewarded—was named as “reading” and “shade” in the House and Ball community. If one watches Dorian Corey break it down in *Paris Is Burning*, the gist of “reading” is that it consists of a direct insult, whereas “shade” is indirect—and often more painful, because there’s an element of truth present.

Shade and reading can be seen as a survival strategy and a way to pre-emptively strike the first blow against homophobia and potential violence from the outside world. But in the same way that Brazilian slaves hid fighting moves within the capoeira dance, gays and lesbians have often turned to language to mask anger and hurt, and to build resiliency. Nowhere is this skill more finely crafted than in the House and Ballroom community; but it’s also true that the language of the House and Ball community has been appropriated by everyone from Christian Soriano in *Project Runway* to RuPaul in his show *Drag Race*. Take for example the word “fierce,” which has been transformed from its ordinary meaning to a word that refers to something that’s great, fantastic, or amazing: “Girl, that outfit is fierce!” Indeed by now this usage has been pretty much co-opted by mainstream gay and lesbian culture. Then there’s Beyoncé Knowles, who reinvented herself as “Sasha Fierce” and publicly acknowledged in a 1996 interview with *The Independent* that the House and Ball community inspired her alter ego. In a humorous twist, however, this community reacted by transforming the word yet again, to have a more negative connotation.

The classification of the House and Ball community as a subculture within the GLBT world becomes problematical in light of its contributions to this world and the acceptance it has received. It’s further complicated by the fact that we now have a mixed-race president and a more ethnically diverse nation than ever, so the tendency to regard communities of color as marginal and disenfranchised is becoming increasingly dated. Perhaps it would be best to see House and Ball as a patch in the gay social quilt and its ongoing effort to be stitched into the fabric of American culture. ■



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