

Rize

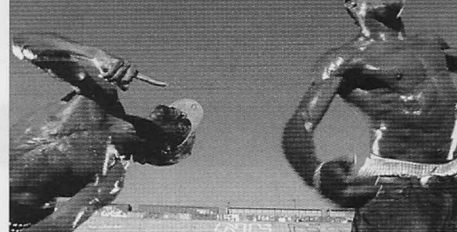
USA 2005, 85 min.

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He doesn't need to say it, but one of the youngsters featured in the South Central, Los Angeles, dance film *Rize* proclaims: "We're of more value than any piece of custom jewellery, or any car or any house anybody could buy."

Fashion photographer David LaChapelle's showstopper features a spectacular Californian urban phenomenon that puts commercial hip-hop to shame. 'Clowning' and 'krumping' are rapid-fire styles of dance set to hip hop music that were given a name and focus – if not created – by a man in a rainbow wig and clown face paint. After a stint in prison for dealing drugs and the 1992 Rodney King riots, Tommy Johnson turned his life around – and that of his neighbourhood – by starting to hire himself out as a hip hop clown for children's parties.

Youngsters started learning Tommy the Clown's moves. First, a hip-hop clown academy and then 50 splinter groups were formed. Tommy became a positive mentor to many of the dancers in the ghetto. Today, in a place where wearing the wrong colours can be fatal, dancing in clown paint is a third alternative to joining the Bloods or the Crips gangs.



Dragon, Tight Eyez and Ms Prissy are among the characters who, off the dance floor, offer their mixed feelings about the hood, as well as clarity about the past and future. On the dance floor, they leave the viewer speechless.

One of the half-dozen extended dance segments, the LA dancers are intercut with ethnographic-looking footage of dancers with painted faces in Africa. The film also touches on the role of spirituality, and notably the Pentecostal church, in the dancing. In one outdoor nighttime competition, a girl passes out in dance-triggered ecstasy. A little boy says that that's the 'zone' they are all hoping to enter.

Connecticut-born LA transplant LaChapelle has photographed countless stars and created music videos for the likes of Christina Aguilera, but doesn't show off here. Yes, the cinematography by Morgan Susser and Michael Totten is colourful and sometimes exotically lit. However, the shots tend to conservatively frame the dancers from head to toe, letting the sense of place and the audience into the picture. Shots from very different locations are confidently cut back-to-back. The material is never sped up, but sometimes slowed down to showcase the moves.

It all builds up to a 'friendly' dance competition between Tommy's dancers and their rivals at LA's Great Western Front. The dance-offs in front of thousands are elating. But an act of crime that night is a reminder of the violent forces the dancers are fighting to transcend.