

by Kimberly_Gadette

Movie Review of "STOMP THE YARD"

The film opens with a slow motion tracking on a woman's long black tresses snaking forward and back, inviting us into the movement. Then crash! The audience is slammed into a high energy hip-hop wall of sound while crowds of young, prenatally gifted street dancers compete against each other. The moves are jaw-dropping—dancers spin on the top of their heads, fly Evel Kneivel-style over three crouching bodies and then, to top it all off, a young man (Chris Brown) rises up into what at first seems to be a handstand. Wrong. Called the "D Blaze," he balances all his weight on one elbow, his body suspended in mid-air for impossible minutes on end.

Welcome to "Stomp the Yard," where central L.A. street meets Atlanta frat boy step.

The slight plot is almost a throwaway, except for the fact that we need a reason to cheer on the hero, and we need a storyline to move from one amazing dance scene to the next. When older brother DJ (Columbus Short) talks his gang into competing in a gritty street dance competition, they win. The losers are less than gracious and a fight quickly escalates into warfare, with DJ's younger brother Duron (Brown) murdered in the melee. DJ is sent off to an upscale black college in Atlanta, under the watchful eyes of his aunt and uncle. At the fictional Truth University, DJ's flashy street dancing gets the attention of two warring fraternities, both fiercely proud of their heritage of "stepping." DJ's a proud loner, an outsider, and is resistant to anything smacking of teamwork. But there's a beautiful girl named April (Meagan Good) and next thing he knows, he's trying his best to fit in to win her over. He learns about tradition and, as one would expect, gets a big dose of self-respect along the way.

Meanwhile, the audience learns about stepping, an African boot dance brought over to America in 1906, consisting of complex moves and rhythmic sounds created by the imaginative use of the body: slapping, clapping, stomping, slamming, etc. In a recent interview with CBS, "Stomping the Yard" producer Will Packer explained, "Everything about stepping is very dramatic, over-the-top and precise, so it really teaches teamwork and bonding, which really are some of the principles of brotherhood and sisterhood which is what these organizations [fraternities and sororities] are all about."

Lead actor Columbus Short knows all about stepping, having toured in the Broadway show "Stomp" (still going strong since its inception in 1991). With a past life as choreographer for the likes of Britney Spears and Brandy, Short seems to be adapting to acting with just as much success ("War of the Worlds," "Studio 60"). He's a natural on film, exuding a quiet charm and honesty that carries the movie. With a lesser talent, "Stomping the Yard" would have (forgive the pun) fallen short.

Another fairly new talent in film is director Sylvain White. Coming from a visual background in music video, his choices keep his audience "on its toes." Aside from the quick breathless cuts in the opening, and dance scenes that astound throughout the film, White cleverly juxtaposes the bleak, ash-and-black inner city street dance nightclub of L.A. against the pastoral college campus with its brick buildings framed by 100-year-old trees. Though the settings couldn't be more different, the rivalries are just as fierceâ€”if the frat boys happened to be packing, violent results could occur just as easily.

In 1957, the choreographer of a stage musical introduced tough, rival gangs who gracefully leapt and pirouetted down a New York City street, yet still retained a strong sense of masculinity. In 1961 that feat was translated to film. The choreographer was Jerome Robbinsâ€”the musical was "West Side Story." 50 years later, choreographer Dave Scott has echoed that brilliance.

Shakespeare it ain't. But even old Will would have probably tapped a toe or two.

Grading this movie on the curve of the Deschutes River: B

Click here to view the movie trailer of "Stomp the Yard".

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Production Credits: "STOMP THE YARD" Directed by: Sylvain White Screenplay by: Robert Adetuyi Earlier screenplay by: Gregory Ramon Anderson Choreography by: Dave Scott Cast: Columbus Short, Meagan Good, Ne-Yo, Chris Brown, Darrin Henson, Brian J. White, Valarie Pettiford, Harry J. Lennix
Rated: PG-13 Running Time: 115 minutes Grade: B

The Screen Savor: "Slappy Feet"™ by Kimberly_Gadette