

Hip hop is always on

Niki Tsappos on championing women in dance

Interview: Annette van Zwoll

In the dance film “Martha & Niki”, director Tora Mårtens follows the remarkable friendship of the first female world champions in hip hop, Niki Tsappos and Martha Nabwire. In the run up to its screening as part of our Urban Feminism programme, Annette van Zwoll speaks with one of its stars, Swedish dancer Niki Tsappos, on Zoom.

Annette van Zwoll: Following the success of “Martha & Niki”, you have been busy MC-ing, battling, teaching workshops and creating shows. What does dance mean to you?

Niki Tsappos: Dance is a vehicle with which I can enter layers of myself, situations, people and spaces, that I cannot think or talk myself into. In Western

society, some parts of the individual are inspired to grow, while others are not. Dance opened up a whole part of my identity that had always been there, but that had not yet been activated. I was born in Ethiopia and brought up in Sweden. The African, black side of me is given more space when I dance: from following the rhythms to ways of seeing life and becoming comfortable with myself. Dance expands all sides of me.

AvZ: The film offers an insight into your efforts to make dance battles more inclusive for women. From within the scene, that activism wasn’t always appreciated, and from the outside, your gender was constantly emphasized as something extraordinary. Looking back at that period, how did you experience it?

NT: It was very two-sided. Us winning the world championship Juste Debout in Paris had a big influence on the community as a whole. We didn’t realise it then, but it really opened up a space for women to do their own thing. It also made it easier for men to step away from hyper-masculine

movements and expand their movement range. This shift is still the best thing about winning, and helping it gain momentum has been a big part of my journey. Women are here, and they are here to stay! But even now, when I get invited to teach a workshop, the organisation often tells me that I’m the first female hip hop dancer to teach there. They say it with pride, but I find it shameful. What have they been doing all this time?

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AvZ: As we see in the film, later you become a judge at Juste Debout. Before then the jury was all male. Was that an empowering moment for you?

NT: Yes, absolutely! I had a lot of support, but there was also a backlash because some men thought that I wasn’t able to judge them. I think that I and other women tend to judge differently: we tend to be less interested in spectacular moves or impressed by fame or big names. Rather, we demand honesty in dance. Also,



Niki Tsappos (links) und Martha Nabwire (rechts) © Mkwandawire Mårtens



Film still aus "Martha & Niki" © Mkwandawire Mårtens

we weren't really considered part of the group, so we didn't face the risk of falling outside of it. But the conversation has matured in the past years, and I feel the younger generation has a different approach. Now women demand to be given space, and men have become better listeners.

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AvZ: For a while now there has been a great deal of interest in hip hop from institutions and the established theatre, dance and art scenes. How do you relate to this tendency?

NT: Hip hop is a lifestyle. It's a creative way of being. Being able to make something out of nothing and the 'each one teach one' philosophy are important elements. You need to be open to learn from everyone and teach every day. Hip hop is always on. It can move into many different spaces and places, but in Eu-

rope people often lose its essence. They want to take a little piece of it that matches the theatre context they are working in or squeeze it into a dance class from three till five o'clock. It becomes white-washed and only touches the surface.

AvZ: What is currently the focus point of your art-making and what is your dream for the future?

NT: My work is still connected to being in the now, to exploring new possibilities and to self expression. I consider it a life journey to know myself and others better. Lately my work has moved more towards the healing aspect of dance. I have become a lot slower and am giving more attention to the in-between movements. I organise gatherings with people of different ages and from different walks of life. I want to solidify the practice that I've built over the years and would love to spend half of the year in Europe and half of the year in Africa. That's the dream. 📌

**Tora Mkwandawire Mårtens
Martha & Niki**

Online (dringeblieden.de) | 6.-22.8., on demand
Film im Rahmen von URBAN FEMINISM 2021



Beverly KóTÁ WALI | Workshop URBAN FEMINISM 2021 | © Dajana Lothert

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