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Dzi Croquettes: Glitter, Dance and Family in the Face of Repression

Campbell Britton · Thursday, November 17th, 2011

A brilliant new documentary film titled *Dzi Croquettes* has come out of Brazil, and is currently in limited release in Los Angeles and New York to qualify for an Academy Award nomination bid. The film is a vibrant memory of thirteen gay men who comprised the avant-garde theatrical troupe of the title – a daring carnival-cum-cabaret act of glamorous androgyny – that erupted onto the Brazilian stage in the early 1970s.

Made on a shoestring budget in 2009 by Tatiana Issa and Raphael Alvarez, *Dzi Croquettes* is not only the most awarded feature documentary in Brazilian history but has also garnered “Best Documentary” awards in a slew of international film festivals throughout 2010. Recent excellent reviews of the film from the [Los Angeles Times](#), [LA Weekly](#), and [Film Journal International](#) have tried to give American readers a quick image of the dance-theatre group by comparing it to the San Francisco-based gender-bending Cockettes of the same era, even as they allude to vast differences in talent and importance between the two.

The differences, in fact, are everything. *Dzi Croquettes* is a complex film grounded in equally complex historical events and aesthetics that epitomize Brazilian culture’s embrace of “cultural cannibalism,” ambiguity and paradox. And the very structure of the documentary guides us to the three most salient qualities that made Dzi Croquettes uniquely different from the free-wheeling “express yourself” Cockettes: the courageous timing of its emergence, the professional virtuosity of its performances, and the tightly-knit “family” commitment of its members. The group imbued all three of these with an irrepressible celebration of the human body and spirit, and the thirteen Croquettes continually put themselves on the line to achieve the artistry and personal freedoms that they sought.

Dzi Croquettes was a dutifully rehearsed, finely-tuned theatre collective of forcefully beautiful, dedicated and talented young men. Campy costumed skits that satirized Brazil’s most sacred institutions were interlaced with precision ensemble dance numbers featuring toned male buttocks in g-strings. Signature white-face and glitter make-up, finished off with enormous false eyelashes, was an artistic tour-de-force – meticulously applied and coordinated within the group. Far from being a drag show, Dzi Croquettes broke all taboos by mixing elements of male and female clothing (particularly undergarments) in a blatant contestation of gender markers while never disguising its natural masculinity. The film highlights this playful core of ambiguity when it shows Dale onstage announcing, “we’re not men . . . oh, no . . . and we’re not women either . . . we’re

people . . . just like you.”

The young men of Dzi Croquettes took extraordinary personal risks with their bold theatrical statement of sexual and artistic freedom in Brazil, since the U.S.-backed military coup of 1964 had “hardened” in 1968. Waves of police repression against performing artists often ended in exile, arrests, beatings and torture. Any form of “deviant” behavior was also targeted as suspect. The group became a pivotal link in a defiant counterculture that eventually exploded under the dual yoke of the Brazilian elite and military dictatorship. Only in 1974 did Dzi Croquettes decide to leave Brazil and perform in Paris, winning the enthusiastic support of star performers such as Josephine Baker and Liza Minnelli.

Producer-directors Issa and Alvarez have done a masterful job of illustrating the skill, electricity, and sheer *panache* that characterized the group, using German recordings of Dzi Croquettes’ Paris appearances (since archival film footage of Brazilian performances was either lost or destroyed long ago). Dzi Croquettes was entirely professional, marked by the perfectionism of Brooklyn-born ex-pat singer/dancer/choreographer/director Lennie Dale (né Leonardo La Ponzina). The iconoclastic Dale brought his lifetime of discipline, technique and choreographic inspiration to Dzi Croquettes, ironically challenging them with near-dictatorial ten-hour-a-day dance rehearsals.

Dzi Croquettes lived together in its own interpretation of the extended family structure so prized by Brazilians, parodying themselves (as gay men) as well as the institution itself. Each man assumed an assigned female role (e.g. “Mother,” “Aunt,” Sister,” “Niece”) except for Dale, who was the “Father” figure. They formed a kind of “closed shop” of constructed and protective kinship. Yet with all the labels of feminine identities, none of the men were transvestites, nor desired to become transsexual. They most resembled an irreverent and rowdy “band of brothers.” Issa, who narrates the film from her own experience as the ever-present little daughter of the group’s technical designer, completes the family portrait by surrounding a wealth of interviews, character investigations, and performance excerpts with the familial love she felt for and from these remarkable men of glitter.

The documentary *Dzi Croquettes* introduces us so completely to the political, professional, and personal lives of the troupe that we come to care about its members as individuals. It hits especially hard when we learn that only five of the original thirteen men have survived to tell their story on camera.

Dzi Croquettes begins a one-week run at the [IFC Center](#) in New York City on Friday, November 18, the day after it ends its run in Los Angeles.

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