Cultural Daily

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Lil Buck @ The Broad Stage: What Moves Him

Sarah Elgart · Wednesday, May 11th, 2016

In 2011, when director Spike Jonze recorded dancer **Charles "Lil Buck" Riley** on his cell phone while performing an interpretive street version of "The Dying Swan" to live accompaniment by cellist Yo Yo Ma, it went viral within weeks and he rose to international stardom with only twenty-three years behind him. With his singular morphing of moves that reference Hip Hop, gliding, flexing, and classical ballet, suddenly a new style of street dance was introduced to the world. Acclaimed by the New York Times for his ability to *"skate in sneakers"*, and now with creds that include appearances at arts institutions such as New York's Guggenheim and Lincoln Center, music videos with the likes of Janelle Monae, a Super Bowl half time show, and Madonna's recent international Rebel Hearts tour behind him, it seems like the world is Lil Buck's oyster.

Lil buck in a film for Vogue

Currently preparing for his upcoming show at The Broad Stage in LA on May 13 &14, this one accompanied by cellist Mihai Marica, I had a chance to catch up with Lil Buck and find out a little more about his background and what moves him. In speaking to him, I was immediately struck by his humility, his passion for dance, and the apparent depth of his search. His training began at the age of thirteen on the streets of Memphis where both he himself and the dance style known as Jookin' were born and lived.

"Its very cultural there… People grow up into it. I was always into dance, but seeing that style made me want to jump into it. I used to draw a lot, that was my hobby… But when I saw Jookin' it was like nothing I'd ever seen and I knew it was what I wanted to do."

With a desire to "*slow down my style"*, at the age of sixteen Lil Buck got pulled sideways into classical ballet while performing with a hip-hop group called Sub Culture Royalty. In short order he was offered a scholarship and a place in New Ballet Ensemble, where the hip hop company was using space for their own rehearsals: "We made a deal with the artistic director so we could learn ballet there. She saw a whole bunch of opportunity in what I was doing. That's how I got into ballet – she wanted me to become a company member, which I did for 3 years. I got into ballet because I was always spinning on my toes… "

Lil Buck jookin' on the Venice Boardwalk

The grace of those spins and his unique style in general have Lil Buck now looking ahead to more touring of live shows, the creation of films, and possible opportunities on Broadway. But despite,

or perhaps because of his successes, Lil Buck has not forgotten the roots of his training on the streets, and part of his forward trajectory includes a devotion to the education of his art.
As such, along with former New York City Ballet Principal Damien Woetzel – himself now a member of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities – Lil Buck continues to do work with inner city schools in the arts, education, and humanities.
"We do these things called 'art strikes' where we go to schools that don't have arts (programs) and we help them put arts into the curriculum. We give the students exposure and inspiration. It's just so important. I graduated from a visual and performing arts school and attending that school was amazing for me."

Lil Buck in a Teen Ted X appearance

In this weekend's upcoming performances at The Broad Stage, Lil Buck will be performing a mixture of improvisation and structured choreography. "I have a lot of pieces that are choreographed through improv, but it's going to be a mixture of both, because I love both. I love improv but I love having some structure. Mihai's pieces are all fixed."
And given that he is once again dancing to the soulful sounds of the cello, I asked Lil Buck what it is about that particular instrument that he connects to: *"I have a special connection with the strings, period. Any instrument with strings really – violin, cello, base, really gets me going…. It's just a vibration in the sound. The strings are the closest sound to representing human emotion, and I just feel it so much when I dance".*

Flying

And between speaking to him, and watching Lil Buck perform, its clear from his singular, gravity and anatomically defiant dance mixture of fluidity and footwork, that he himself is moved. *"It's going to be a great show".*
And if you have any doubt, check out the Yak Films Production of "Tokyo Rain" featured below.
The Eli & Edythe Broad Stage: www.thebroadstage.com
[embedvideo id="HrLn68PiDpg" website="youtube"]

This entry was posted on Wednesday, May 11th, 2016 at 11:00 am and is filed under Theatre, Film, Dance
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