

# Planet B-Boy

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A good documentary, while engrossing, can be a bit of a downer. Planet B-Boy, the first by director Benson Lee, is a rare find within its genre. You get a close-up view of a subculture, but also an uplifting testament to the human spirit. You might even call it "feel-good";

Planet B-Boy documents an international breakdancing competition. For the mainstream, that form went out with parachute pants. But a few grand masters—including Ken Swift and Thomas Hergenrother—give a brief history and explain how this expressive, athletic dance form blossomed in different countries, and now has a large fan base. Rival groups of "B-Boys" and "B-Girls" will challenge one another to "battles" filled with gravity-defying choreography and lightning-quick footwork. At formal competitions, the B-Boy crews add costumes, music, and thematic elements with layers of political and cultural symbolism. The biggest of these is "Battle of the Year," where the best crew from each country competes with 22 other nations. The B-Boys encounter a melee of ethnicities while sharing rehearsal space and primitive dorms.

If you don't go out for dance normally, the B-Boys will win you over with their enthusiasm. Their moves are amazing, but their esprit de corps is what really draws you in to the story. They support one another, on and off the dance platform, amid the tough breaks of being young, urban, and poor. The dancers from Japan and South Korea are at odds with their culture's expectations of success. The French crew features grown black and Middle Eastern men, and one undersized white teen, whose mother describes how her son's friendship with foreigners frames her own journey of racial awareness. Lee works the story beyond the dance—how it helps each member cope with the politics of his country and the circumstances of his life.

Several touching parent-and-child stories are woven in. Some might feel the family moments are cloying, detracting from a pure, anthropological approach to documenting the dance scene. But I felt it added another dimension to the artists and their art form, and added universality to the narrative.

In his director's statement, Benson Lee describes how his childhood love of breakdancing never went away. The time between conception and principal photography was short, yet he and his team knit the elements of the film together with incredible skill. A crew of three raced to five countries in three months. The production values are high. Lee did not use his small budget as a crutch, but stretched himself with sequences that creatively juxtaposed the eccentricity of the dancers with the conservatism of their parents' culture. Predictably, the soundtrack is hip-hop, and the songs are well chosen to set the mood of each scene.

Planet B-Boy is, arguably, a family film. There is a come-from-behind, "Rocky" nature to this movie that transcends the actual winning or losing of the competition. The dancers cuss a little, but there's no violence, sexuality, or drug references (other than a casual beer being enjoyed).

Planet B-Boy is an unusual, refreshing slice of urban life, allowing dance to be a stoplight at a variety of cultural intersections.

Grade: A