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Hip Hop Dance, St Mary's Park, New York — review

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Different flavours and textures emerged in a show that defied expectations



©Alan Roche

The Legendary House of Ninja

SummerStage's dance events, in parks across the five boroughs of New York City, begin with a class; everyone from keen teens to hippity-hopping preschoolers and their mothers is welcome. At St Mary's Park in the South Bronx, that warm spirit of inclusion extended to the show as well.

Co-produced by Dancing in the Streets, with Ana Garcia Dionisio (aka Rokafella) and Gabriel Dionisio (Kwikstep) responsible for the line-up, *Hip Hop Dance: From the Street to the Stage* featured an exceptional number of female and multigenerational troupes. But more than sex or age, their values stood out. This show was not a “battle” — a standard hip-hop format that makes contenders of dancers — but simply a series of dances that allowed distinct textures and flavours to emerge.

The group Full Circle excels in floor work, but here the upended jigsaw legs harmonised with braided standing steps that this crew made buoyant and skittery, graceful and free. Lyricism also marked the Brooklyn girl group Fully Focused, which avoided the trap the few women in the field often fall into of either trying to be “like the boys” or relinquishing themselves to coquetry. Instead, this young sextet used rhythmic aplomb, allusive gesture and loose-hipped dignity to define themselves. The four Asian women representing the Legendary House of Ninja — a longstanding troupe of flamboyant, fabulously costumed voguers — took a more extreme approach, whipping their Dragon Lady personas into such a lather of flying hair and gnomonic gesticulation that the stereotype went up in flames.

What impressed about the multigenerational groups was that the younger members did not copy their old-school leaders except in trusting their quirks. Richard James of the Float Masters boogalooed with hips, knees and arms as loose as a classic swing dancer. Ryota Yamasaki — of Academy of Stylz, led by Emilio Austin Jr (aka Buddha Stretch) — may have punched like a pop-and-locker but he curved like Martha Graham. *From the Street to the Stage* roamed the decades only to arrive again and again at the unclassifiable present.

The show defied expectations right up to its improvised end when, in true street dance fashion, the whole cast formed a freestyle circle for spontaneous solo turns. A uniformed police officer suddenly appeared in their midst. Everyone froze. Then the man dropped to the floor and spun like a top.



SummerStage runs to August 21, summerstage.org; dancinginthestreets.org

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