



DEMONS IN THE DANCE

Imagine a bunch of sweaty, noisy teenaged boys violently dancing in your garage. This is the story of some youths' *Rize* to fame.

Writer **Momo Chang** Photographer **Ejen Chuang**

IT'S CHRISTMAS EVENING, and several teens are gathered at Leilani and Glenn Modina's house in Long Beach, CA. It's a mild 60 degrees outside, and the guys are decked in T-shirts, boots and baggy britches.

For the last five years, a group of 15 to 20 Filipino youngsters have gathered here to practice krumping, a fast-moving, body-jerking style of urban dance that got international hype through the film *Rize*, by David LaChapelle.

In a few seconds of the film, we see a large group of Asian faces—they're literally featured for only a few seconds. LaChapelle went to the home of Leilani and Glenn Modina—a k a Rice Mama and Track Daddy—to film for an entire day, but almost all of the footage was left on the cutting room floor.

"We got done dirty in the movie," says Laurence Gojit, 18, a member of the krumping group Rice Track Family. "We were short-changed."

They're still trying to figure out how to feel after their 15 seconds of fame.

THE DANCE

"When I first looked at [the dance], I thought, 'what the heck are they doing?'" says Glenn.

"It just looks very violent," says Leilani.

And it does look violent. There's a lot of noise, a lot of gesturing and the appearance of fighting.

"They said it's kind of like the feeling of listening to music and doing whatever they're feeling, and they create from it," says Glenn.

On that particular Sunday—Christmas Day—when the guys have agreed to gather for an interview, Rod Soriano warns me on the phone, prior to meeting in person, that the kids were a bit deflated after *Rize*. Since the film's release, he says, they've been less motivated to practice.

On one side of the garage wall are mirrors, pieces that imitate a dance studio. Some of the squares are broken. There's a piece of ditto paper with Sharpied words: "Don't Touch My Mirror." Over the years, the mirrors have been broken—by the dancers themselves, during the heat of the moment. I wondered who the message was for, and who it belonged to.

Their warm-up looks like any dance studio. They line up, facing the mirrors. A series of neck rolls and stretches, small movements in place.

As the pace starts building up, the lines turn into a circle.

One by one, they start showcasing their talent. The best way to describe krumping, Rice Track Family-style, is that it's intense and intimate. Within minutes, they're all sweating.

Not featured in *Rize* is the intensity in sound. There are cries; there's yelling and screaming. It's half impromptu, half technique—and all style.



As each guy does his thing, the others watching get hyped up. They feed off of each other.

When it's Laurence's, a k a Solow's, turn, they gesticulate and throw arms at him. They egg him on, except he's not in a fight. It's their way of showing that they're feeling what he's doing.

There's a lot of swaying and clapping. "Feel it! Feel it!" punctuates the air as each dancer takes his turn to be possessed by the music. At times, it looks like they're about to punch and kick each other.

It's definitely not a dance studio. Somehow, you get the sense that it's not just something they do for fun.

"When you're dancing, you're trying to get all the negative energy out," Laurence explains. "You're fighting the negative spirits. It's spiritual warfare."

THE FAMILY

The RTOD's—Rice Track Original Dancers—are Rod "Hot Rod" Soriano, Jorayne "No Good" Sarno, Ross "Roscoe" Cortez and Isaiah "Ice." Like many youth growing up with hip-hop running through their veins, they were b-boys who frequented

school dances and house parties on the weekends.

Sometimes they would hit up five dances each weekend, cruising around the L.A. area and making rounds, party after party. They gained local fame and made a name for themselves in the house party circuit of L.A., circa the late '90s.

"All the little kids wanted to follow us," says Rod, 21.

They began realizing the power of dance and started mentoring younger kids who wanted to emulate their style of dancing.

Then Thomas Johnson, a k a Tommy the Clown, who created "clown" dancing in the early '90s, invited them to some of his parties in Inglewood. Tommy the Clown scheduled Rod and his friends to battle against other dancers, who were mostly African American. Clowning includes painted faces, sharp moves, and is a style popular with kids.

"We built up a connection through [Tommy the Clown]," Rod says. "It was a domino effect."

"When I saw them do the dance, it just tripped me out," says Tommy the Clown about seeing Asian dancers for the first

PHOTO: E-JEN CHUANG

time. "I was like, man, everybody's catching on. How serious the Asians are with the movement is really amazing."

When they started the Rice Track Clowns five years ago, it was all about clowning and stripper-dancing. Now it's krumping. They've since changed their name to The Rice Track Family.

If they're the original dancers of the group, then Leilani and Glenn Modina—Rod's aunt and uncle—are Mom and Dad. They've been lovingly dubbed Rice Mama and Track Daddy. Sometimes, they're just referred to as Auntie and Uncle (but everyone needs an a k a around here).

"We know these kids a lot better than some of their families," says Leilani. "This is their safe haven."

The Modinas provide a space for the kids to practice their dance. Sometimes, they also practice at the Silverado Teen Center in Long Beach where Rod works, but this space is different; it's a second home for many of these kids.

Leilani explains that most of the youngsters are either former gang members or are struggling against gang culture. Most grew up in single-parent households.

Though their practices are noisy—imagine a bunch of teenaged boys hanging out in your living room, treading dirt across your carpet, blasting the radio in your garage, then eating all your food—the Modinas don't mind.

"As a parent, I'd rather see them here," says Glenn Modina. "If dancing is their avenue, I try to support them."

They explain that all the guys—and they are all guys—are somehow related. Cousins of cousins, brothers of cousins of cousins. It's hard just keeping track of the guys' names, plus their aliases, let alone how they're all connected. What is clear is that it's definitely a family affair.

Within the family, there's a whole system of mentoring younger kids, or "lil' homies." The older kids find youngsters craving for dance, craving for that safe space.

Chris Tanedo, a k a Pokeey, is 19 and has several "lil' homies" he's recruited and mentored: Sung, 17, Lil' Pokeey, Mark Irang, 14, Baby Pokeey, and Raf Ocampo, 14, Young Pokeey.

It's a family that, in many ways emulated gang culture, where family is center—except their outlet is dance.

"They just keep growing up and up, the lil' homies," he says half-lamenting, half-proud.

BOYS TO MEN

What began as an after-school activity turned into a rite-of-passage for these kids. This ad hoc family, and dancing, serves as an outlet for their angst and rage.

Boys growing up in America these days are limited to a few models of manhood—the good guy who gets straight-A's, goes to college, gets married, and supports his wife and kids—or the bad-boy, the gangbanger.

"Everyone has forms of oppression and situations they have to deal with," Tommy the Clown says. "By picking up the dance, it's entertaining, it's togetherness. Especially kids and teenagers growing up."

But even within the small, tight-knit world of the Rice Track Family, there are underlying divisions. There's Rod, who's now a college student figuring out his role in life and the community.

There's 18-year-old Laurence, a k a Solow, who aspires to be a professional dancer, unlike the other Rice Track kids who are unsure. In the December 2005 Battle Zone 6—the biggest exhibition for clowers and krumpers—he was the only one from the Rice Track Family to participate.

"I represented the Rice Track Family," he says, though he officially represented Millennium Krump Time, all Long Beach-based dancers of different ethnicities, and no one from the Rice Track Family went to see him dance.

Laurence has struggled with a broken family (divorced parents) and two brothers, one who's a drug addict and another brother who's an ex-gangbanger.

Laurence was named one of the Krump Kings, the only Asian dancer to be knighted the most prestigious title in the krump world. It signifies that he's an originator of the dance, versus a follower. He still comes around to the Modinas', and the younger kids look up to him.

He says that he's re-found faith through dance. He says that krumping has saved him.

"At the end of the day, I get to gather all my peoples who get krumped and it turns the bad day into a good day," he says.

Raf (pronounced "Rav"), a young, lean 14-year-old is on the cover of Krump Battles DVD, though he's not featured in this video ("I guess they liked the way the photo looked"), says that krumping has helped him stay out of trouble.

"When I'm mad, I release my anger through it," he tells me. "And it keeps me



HE SAYS HE'S BEEN RECRUITED SEVERAL TIMES BY GANGS. AND WALKING DOWN THE STREET, GUYS WILL ASK HIM WHERE HE'S FROM. INSTEAD OF CLAIMING A GANG, HIS REPLY IS THAT HE DANCES.

close to my big homies and my friends. This is like my second home, my second family.”

He says he's been recruited several times by gangs. And walking down the street, guys will ask him where he's from. Instead of claiming a gang, his reply is that he dances.

Is that a satisfactory answer? I ask incredulously.

He says it works. Dancers are seen as doing their own thing and are usually not messed with. Still, it's always a breath of relief each time a situation like that passes. It's still a tenuous space that they created, a niche-world where in an ideal world, they can claim a dance crew instead of a gang.

And growing up, and away, is a part of this world. Many of the original dancers in Rice Track Family have moved on to college or work, and the older guys frequent the clubs instead of the Modinas' house or the after-school center.

“A lot of the guys are now 18 and over and are doing their own thing now,” Leilani says. “But we've got another generation of kids.”

RISING FROM RIZE

The peak of Rice Track Family was the months leading up to the Battle Zone in 2003, featured in *Rize*. They were striving to make their mark with one goal in mind: gaining some credibility, coming up as the underdogs in this largely African American world.

“There's a stereotype that all Filipinos and Asians are rich,” Laurence says. “But we all grew up rough. Even our parents grew up rough.”

Leilani recalls organizing neighborhood parties, cooking for hundreds in order to raise the \$800 entrance fee for Battle Zone. As for being featured in the film, she says they were all very excited about it.

“We were all kind of flattered that David LaChapelle wanted to document us,” says Leilani. “Because we're Filipino, and it's a dance started by African Americans.”

So much of their energy was placed on this one outlet. They had high expectations. During the film's premiere, they went and saw it together. After much attention and hype, they were only featured for a few seconds.

“They were putting all this energy into this, as krump dancers but they didn't get the credit for it,” says Leilani. They practiced two to three times a week after school, for hours, until they couldn't take it anymore and were mentally and physically exhausted.

The question of the group's purpose was inevitably raised—what's the point of the Rice Track Family?

“If it's really in their hearts, they should do it, not just for the fame, but because they want to dance,” says Leilani.

Laurence and others do acknowledge that they at least got some screen time (“Yeah, [LaChapelle] gave us a shout-out”). He may go on the Krump Kings tour this summer, but he first has to be selected.

It's a weird relationship with other people of color, especially in the hip-hop world. Where kids growing up who aren't black, but are consuming and imitating black culture inevitably have to create their own space—where they affiliate with a culture but are not really of it.

“This is a talent initiated by black people,” Leilani says. “And they are Filipino. I tell them, ‘Even if you put all your energy into it, you're not black. This is something you can't take away from them.’”

It's only been five years since the Rice Track Family formed, yet things change quickly.

Krumping has global pockets; there are krump crews in Japan and Taiwan. In the U.S., krumpers also include whites and Latinos.

“It was mostly African Americans that were dancing,” Glenn says. “We were the first group that was different, to take it and stir it. That's why the dancing is as colorful as it is now.”

They just haven't gotten much credit for it. And maybe that's okay.

Maybe the Rice Track Family isn't about battle zones. Or about finding fame and recognition through a film. Or even about dancing. Especially after their brief encounter with fame, they've learned there has to be something more.

“The dancing has shortened up,” Laurence says, “But the family remains.” ★

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THE OTHER SIDE OF RIZE: TWO SAMOAN BROTHERS KEEP IT LOW-KEY

TWO OF THE MOST sought-after video music choreographers today are Richmond Talauega, 30, and Tone Talauega, 28. They've choreographed videos for Usher, Madonna, J-Lo and Michael Jackson. They also happen to be the Samoan brothers who produced the film, *Rize*. Born and raised in Richmond, CA in a household of 15, they now live in Los Angeles. Our writer asks Tone Talauega: *Do people in the field know you two are Pacific Islander or Samoan?*

Some people think we're Puerto Rican. A lot of people think we're black because of the way we talk. Most people assume we're either black or Latino (Tone sports seven tattoos that symbolize his Pacific Islander heritage).

How did your family end up in Richmond, California?

My grandfather fought in WWII and came here in the early '60s. That's how a lot of Samoans came to the U.S.—through the

military. I had a shitload of family in the service.

How'd you and your brother get into the dance scene?

We used to sneak out of our little window of our rooms. I think every kid back in those days did. That's how we turned into ghetto celebrities, by going to house parties in the projects and different 'hoods.

Did you have formal dance training?

We didn't come up dancing and taking jazz and hip-hop classes. There were no arts programs, no dance programs, there was nothing like that in the ghettos. We came up just street dancing, doing what we felt was good to us.

How did you end up getting so popular?

We started doing choreography back in '93. Me and Richmond, we came in when the majority of the dancers were jazz dancers. We came from the streets, so everybody was just looking at us like we were foreigners. Which we were. We were

like fish out of water. And now hip-hop is ruling. We were brand-spanking new from the Bay Area. We didn't start getting recognition for being choreographers probably until '97.

Is there good Pacific Islander representation in Hollywood, behind-the-scenes or on screen?

Probably the biggest star in the biz is The Rock, and he's half-black, half-Samoan. He represents his Polynesian side very strongly. He's by far the biggest Polynesian star. There's not a lot of us (in the entertainment industry), and there should be. There's a lot of bodyguards and athletes. People think we are really, really big people.

How do you guys handle the workload?

Sometimes we be double-gigging, triple-gigging. That's why it's good there's two of us. And nobody's going to be there at the end, except for family. —Momo Chang

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