

BOND/360 Presents

STRIKE A POSE



A FILM BY ESTER GOULD AND REIJER ZWAAN

RT: 83 min

Rating: Not Rated

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

In 1990, seven young male dancers - six gay, one straight - joined Madonna on her most controversial tour. On stage and in the iconic film *Truth or Dare* they showed the world how to express yourself. Now, 25 years later, they reveal the truth about life during and after the tour. *Strike a Pose* is a dramatic tale about overcoming shame and finding the courage to be who you are.

LONG SYNOPSIS

In 1990, seven young dancers joined pop star Madonna on her most controversial world tour. Wild, talented and barely twenty, the dancers set out on the trip of a lifetime. Their journey was captured in *Truth or Dare*, one of the highest-grossing documentaries ever. As a self-proclaimed mother to her six gay dancers plus straight Oliver, Madonna used the film to take a stand on gay rights, freedom of expression and the fight against AIDS. Madonna's flamboyant dancers became icons of sexual freedom, inspiring people all over the world to be who you are.

At the height of the AIDS epidemic and in the aftermath of the conservative Reagan era, *Truth or Dare* introduced audiences to fun-loving, bold and larger-than-life gay characters. The film was ground-breaking, featuring two guys kissing passionately during the famous *Truth or Dare* scene. Madonna, determined to push the envelope, defended the film ferociously: "If you keep putting something in people's faces, eventually, maybe they can come to terms with it." The message stuck: even today, the dancers receive thank-you letters from people around the world recalling how the film changed their lives.

Although they were pivotal to Madonna's message, the dancers weren't living it. In fact, Gabriel wasn't proud of being gay at all. After failing to persuade Madonna to cut out the kissing scene that would 'out' him to his family and friends, he filed a lawsuit against her. A few years later, the 26-year-old died of AIDS, a disease that had shamed him into silence. And Gabriel wasn't the only one: Carlton – big, bold and the only dancer who was trusted to lift up the pop icon – was HIV-positive and almost collapsed under the secret that he was carrying on tour. Years of faking and lying distort his life to this day. A third dancer is still hiding an important part of himself and now finally wants to open up. In *STRIKE A POSE*, we encounter the dancers on a new journey. For the first time they tell us how hard it has been to live the liberated life they were promoting on stage. Their incredible stories reveal how fear of other people's judgment holds us back and how hard it is to accept yourself when you feel different. Twenty-five years after the tour and the film that marked pop and gay culture as much as their own lives, the dancers, their dramatic stories and their fierce moves inspire us once again. What does it really take to express yourself?

ABOUT THE CHARACTERS

LUIS CAMACHO

Luis - a born dancer and diva - learnt how to be proud and fearless on the streets of New York. In the eighties, before Madonna took vogue mainstream, he and his dance partner Jose were striking poses in Harlem's house ballrooms: a gay and drag scene in which men compete against one another for their dancing skills, style and catwalk presence. Partying hard at night, Luis' days consisted of strict ballet classes at the disciplinary dance school Aileys. He and Jose taught Madonna how to vogue.

OLIVER CRUMES III

Oliver has swag. The only straight dancer on the tour stands out from the others with his bubbly, puppy-like enthusiasm and simple stance on life. Born and raised in the projects of New Orleans, he moved to LA at the age of 15 where he began his career in hip-hop dancing. "It's hard to believe, but I was the Elton John of hip-hop." He and his brother Lance taught themselves how to dance by frantically copying Michael Jackson's "Thriller" video, in the days when folks like the Crumes family didn't own VCR recorders. Oliver admits to being homophobic when he first joined the troupe. He still remembers every single move from the Blond Ambition tour.

SALIM "SLAM" GAUWLOOS

Of all the dancers, Salim is the most critical of Madonna's personality, her current work and the whole idea that she was like a mother to them: "I have a mother. I love my mother!" Born in a small Flemish town by Belgian-Moroccan parents, Salim moved to the US after being selected for an American ballet school at the age of 17. His second country named him "Slam," a name he grew to dislike after years of living and working in the US as an illegal immigrant: "It's fake and shallow, just like American society and the entertainment industry are too." He recalls working for rich and fancy advertising companies yet fearing to be kicked out of the country. It's only lately that Salim has come to see what both the tour and *Truth or Dare* have meant to people around the world: "We helped the world to come out of the closet!"

JOSE GUTIEREZ

Jose Gutierrez was born and raised in the Lower East Side area of New York City; his parents having emigrated from the Dominican Republic. During his youth the neighborhood was a hotbed of raw creative energy, giving rise to the new wave music scene, the emergence of DJ culture, the development of the graffiti / street art movement, and the growing popularity of drag culture and entertainment. This vibrant environment would influence the way Jose perceived the world around him and the opportunities it presented for his own creative energy. As a child enrolled in a program of formal dance education, going on to attend the prestigious Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts and studying under master choreographer Eliot Feld.

KEVIN STEA

Kevin at first wasn't selected to be part of the Blond Ambition Tour. Only when another dancer was kicked out by Madonna, she asked him to come on board as a dancer and dance captain. Kevin didn't even know what that was when he said "yes." He now sees the tour as his coming-of-age and coming-out party at the same time and feels lucky it was all recorded on film. Kevin now looks back without any naïveté about what he has been part of. "Only now, in the past seven years or so and from social media, have I actually seen the impact this movie had on pop and gay culture. I constantly receive messages from people recalling how this movie — this bigger-than-life glimpse into a world beyond shame-filled communities, closeted lives, and disapproving families — changed their lives."

SUE TRUPIN Gabriel's mother

In 1995, Gabriel died of AIDS at the age of 26. Despite her huge loss, Sue Trupin wants to tell her son's story. Working with Madonna and the other dancers meant a lot to Gabriel. "But it was never meant to be the highpoint of his career. I always hoped Gabriel would dance for a respected dance company and nobody doubted he had talent." The other dancers too describe Gabriel as a wonderful dancer "with the grace of an angel."

CARLTON WILBORN

"Give me more of you!" is what Madonna always told the dancers during rehearsal and for Carlton this still is his mission in life. In *Truth or Dare* the strong black dancer seemed to be the personification of proud self-expression - laughing loud, dancing wild and jumping into Madonna's bed bare naked. But coming from a background of sexual abuse, strained family relations and carrying a secret, his outgoingness was more a pose than true confidence. "I was acting all grand, but inside I was feeling fucking small".

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

ESTER GOULD, Director

Ester Gould (1975, Peterculter) is a Scottish-born documentary filmmaker who lives and works in Amsterdam. She studied Film and Journalism in Amsterdam and New York (NYU Tisch School of the Arts) and began her career as a researcher and scriptwriter for acclaimed director Heddy Honigmann. Since 2005 she has been directing her own documentaries for Dutch public broadcasters. Her first feature-length documentary *Shout*, jointly directed with Sabine Lubbe Bakker and shot in Syria and the Israeli Golan Heights, won the prize for Best Film at the London International Documentary Film Festival in 2010. *A Strange Love Affair with Ego* (2015) - her second feature documentary - premiered at IDFA and won the award for Best Dutch Documentary and an EDA Award for best female-directed film from the Alliance of Women Film Journalists. *STRIKE A POSE* is her third feature-length film.

REIJER ZWAAN, Director Reijer Zwaan (1981) is a journalist and filmmaker for Dutch Public Television. He works as deputy editor-in-chief for Nieuwsuur (Newshour), the main current affairs program in the Netherlands. Since he started there in 2004, he gained experience as an investigative reporter and as head of the political desk. Reijer studied Political Science in Amsterdam and New York (New School University). Before that he studied acting at the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute. He was born and raised in Amsterdam. Reijer was 11 years old when he first saw *Truth Or Dare*. He was fascinated by the film and as the years passed, he couldn't help but ask himself what might have happened to the young dancers who had made such an impact. *STRIKE A POSE* is his first feature length film.

CREDITS

A VERY SPECIAL THANKS TO

LUIS CAMACHO
OLIVER CRUMES III
SALIM GAUWLOOS
JOSE GUTIEREZ
KEVIN STEA
GABRIEL TRUPIN
CARLTON WILBORN

STRIKE A POSE

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