

# High-Energy ‘Battle of the Year’ Needs More Originality

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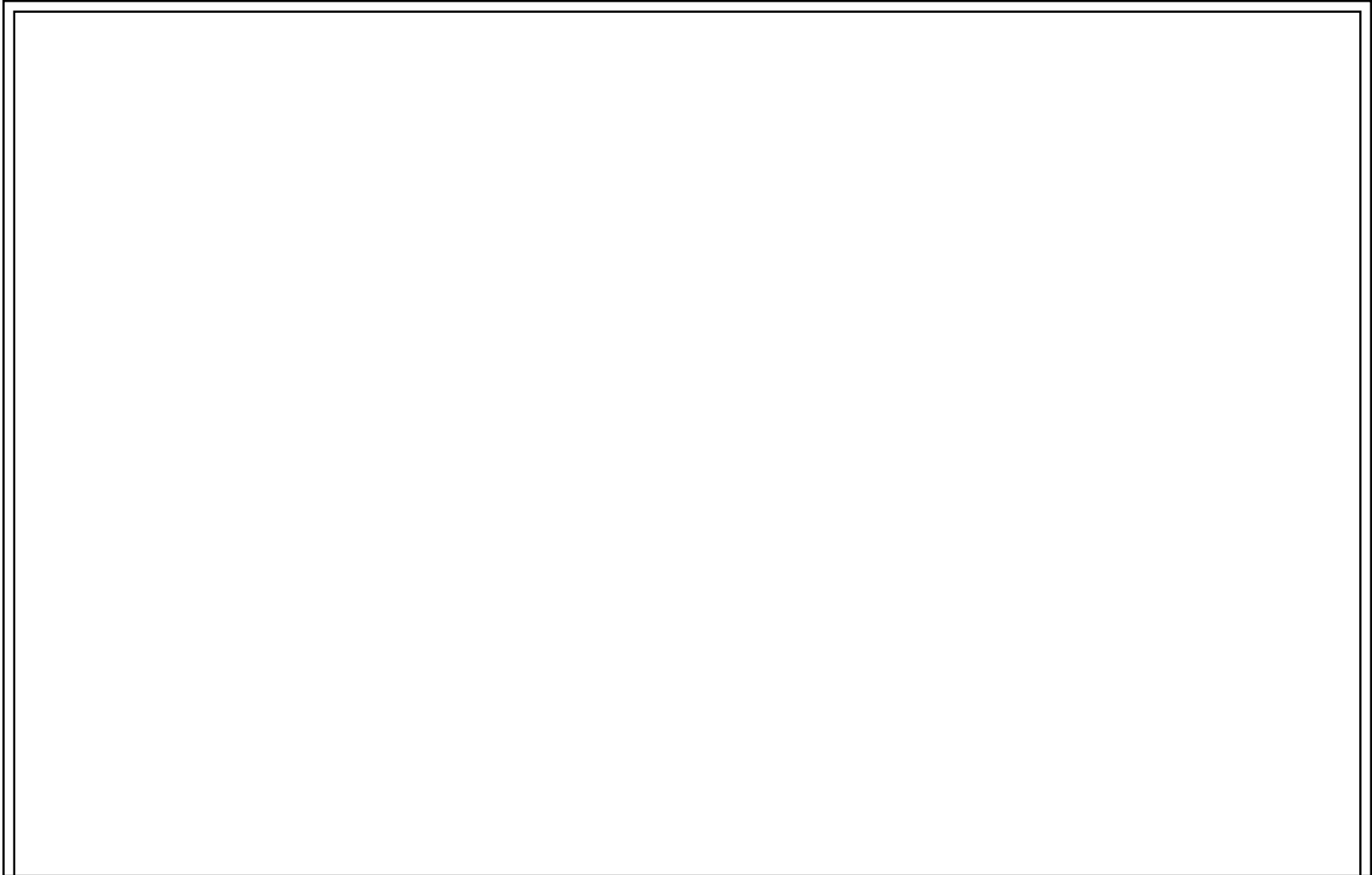
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CHICAGO – “B Boys” – or as they’re known by the more familiar term as break dancers – are high energy street performers who combine gymnastic moves with tight choreographed dance. This all comes together in a film depicting an international competition called “Battle of the Year.”

This is basically a hey-kids-let’s-put-on-a-show for post millennial street tough dancers, as if Gene Kelly had been born in Brooklyn in the 1990s and learned his moves break dancing on cardboard in the ‘hood. The gyrations ooze aggressive testosterone, and the “dream team” characters in the film highlight these traits, but they’re also a dance troupe putting together steps for a talent show. Although updated to now – with sneaker endorsements and hip-hop beats – it’s still about the show, and overcoming the obstacles to get to the so-called Battle of the Year. There is copious borrowing from other sports movies to get there – particularly “Rocky” – and there is a sense that a modern storyline such as this could find they’re own original path.

Dante Graham (Laz Alonso) is a hip-hop mogul who has a problem. The United States has not won a B Boy competition – the Battle of the Year – in several years, despite break dancing being invented here. Germany, France, Russia and especially South Korea have taken the reins, and Graham is afraid that interest is waning in the States, which means that interest will wane in his product line. Something’s got to give.





Freeze!: The B Boys Strike a Pose in ‘Battle of the Year’

*Photo credit: Screen Gems*

What the mogul does is recruit Jason Blake (Josh Holloway), a burnt out basketball coach who used to B Boy dance with Graham. The former coach is devastated by the death of his wife and child, and Graham offers him redemption if he’ll coach America’s B Boy team for the Battle of the Year, taking place in France. Blake assembles a “dream team” with the help of Franklyn (Josh Peck), and is further aided by choreographer Stacy (Caity Lotz). The question is can the new coach get over his demons – and the team’s problems – to win it all?

There is not one thing wrong with the film, off the bat. It is fun, has high energy and is targeted toward teenagers and hip-hop fans. It was just so decidedly old fashion in the way it told its story that it induced several unintended laughs. The opening meeting with Dante Graham talking about the potential death of hip-hop is a gem, complete with Laz Alonso doing his best P. Diddy and the extras around the boardroom acting hilariously stiff. They were chosen, no doubt, to look like a hip-hop boardroom, but they can’t quite pull it off.

The dancers are real, and their acting isn’t too bad. The leader is named Rooster (Chris Brown) and he becomes an antagonist for Coach Jason. Josh Holloway and Josh Peck portray the coaching staff, Holloway trying to be sincere as the man with the damaged psyche, and Peck adding some nice comic relief as a B Boy fan who has no rhythm. The former star of TV’s popular “Josh and Drake” is ready to break out, this guy has screen presence.

The dancing is pretty high energy, but strikingly mannish, as if football players were taught how to move. There is one gay member of the troupe – he mentions it every time the camera pans to him – but he is a tough guy as well, challenging a much bigger colleague over an insult to his mother. I kid you not. The choreography of all the international teams are similar to the untrained eye, but it’s the South Koreans have it knocked, and they stand out appropriately.



Coaches Jason (Josh Holloway) and Franklyn (Josh Peck) in ‘Battle of the Year’  
Photo credit: Screen Gems

But what is a little competition without obstacles. Besides a heavy drinking and grieving coach, there are injuries, fights, stand-offs and egos-that-need-to-be-a-team. It’s about the overcoming, which is a theme in sports movies since Joe E. Brown was cranking ‘em out for Warner Bros. in the 1930s – you can look it up. And the ending ripoff – I mean homage – to the film “Rocky,” should elicit a phone call from Sly Stallone to Screen Gems.

Regardless, this is the perfect movie for the modern international era. High energy, a cast from everywhere and lots of B Boy grooving. Is grooving the right term? Probably not. I think I’ve past the expiration date to even utter or use a term like “B Boy.” C’est la vie.

*“Battle of the Year” openings everywhere on September 20th. Featuring Josh Holloway, Laz Alonzo, Josh Peck and Caity Lotz. Written by Brin Hill and Chris Parker. Directed by Benson Lee. Rated “PG-13”*



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [19]  
Senior Staff Writer  
[HollywoodChicago.com](http://HollywoodChicago.com)  
[pat@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com) [18]

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