



Martha & Niki Discussion Guide

Director: Tora Mkandawire Mårtens

Year: 2015

Time: 93 min

You might know this director from:
Colombianos (2012)

FILM SUMMARY

Back in the day, hip-hop dancing was found only at parties, clubs, and in the streets as beats came flooding out of boomboxes all over the world. Now, dancers like Martha Nabwire and Niki Tsappos can make names for themselves in international hip-hop dance competitions like Juste Debout, where in 2010 the Swedish duo became the first women to become world champions in hip-hop. Beginning at the height of their success, Tora Mkandawire Mårtens's *MARTHA & NIKI* delves into the world of competitive dance culture while exploring the emotional complexities of a coming-of-age female friendship and the cultural cost of international immigration to stunning effect.

As a baby, Niki was adopted in Sweden from Ethiopia, while Martha immigrated from Uganda to Sweden as a teenager. Bound by a love of dance and a shared African heritage, they found their footing in the spotlight of hip-hop dance competitions, challenging gender-norms by proving they were the best, regardless of the fact that they were women. But where does the line between professional partnership and a genuine friendship begin to blur? As time goes by, Martha and Niki's career goals and personal aspirations begin to diverge and the foundation of their friendship begins to crack.

With a greater sense of cultural detachment, having grown up in a more closely connected community in Uganda, Martha begins to become disillusioned with the fame of dance competitions and to long for her beloved African homeland where she grew up in close connection to music. Meanwhile, Niki aches to see where dance will take her. Emotionally complex and culturally poignant, *MARTHA & NIKI* invites us to consider our roots in relation to who we are, how we express ourselves, and the friendships and partnerships we make.

FILM THEMES

Much more than a simple dance film, *MARTHA & NIKI* keys into the special bond of female friendship, examines the sense of dislocation and cultural cost of moving from one country to another, and the pain of coming-of-age as young adults begin to grow in their own unique directions in life.

DANCE AS AN ART OF STORYTELLING

Though imperative to the cultural inheritance of people from around the world, dance often gets relegated to a lower form of art in the minds of many. For Martha and Niki, dance is their purest, most beautiful form of expression. Where words fail them, the rhythmic movement of their bodies convey the stories of their lives—the heartbreak, the jubilation, and everything in between. As if keeping a journal, they work out their trials and tribulations through physical movement, choreographed to manifest and express their innermost feelings without words.

FEMALE FRIENDSHIP

Not often depicted on screen, the special and infinitely complex bond of female friendship is encapsulated between Niki and Martha. Having spent so much time together, not only as friends who are both members of the African diaspora, but more intimately as dance partners, they've developed a system of unspoken communication and visual coordination that could not be replicated by another. Together they can take on anything, even the male-dominated world of hip-hop dance.

A CULTURAL COST TO IMMIGRATION

Though both Martha and Niki were born in African nations, Martha grew up entrenched in African cultural traditions, having emigrated to Sweden as a teenager, while Niki was adopted as a baby by a family in Sweden. Both of them adapted to their new homes in Sweden, taking on new traditions and cultural values, while taking pride in their African heritage and integrating it into their lives as much as possible. But there is a cost to moving away from one's home, let alone uprooting from one continent to settle down in another. What exactly is lost? While the girls travel to Africa in an attempt to answer this question, Martha finds that the cultural costs may be too high for her to tolerate any longer.

SOMETIMES PATHS PART WAYS

Growing up is painful for many of reasons, one being the point when a person realizes that the lives of many of the friends they have grown up with are destined to diverge. People go to different schools, get different jobs, move to different cities, and meet different people. Everyone's path in life is wholly unique. While this is a beautiful part of life, it can be heartbreaking and confusing when the life of a person you are close to begins taking them in a direction away from you. Niki experiences this when Martha decides that she no longer wants to be a part of the dance duo for which they've become publicly known. But, their paths diverge, for better or worse.

“Dance first, think later. It’s the natural order.”

Samuel Beckett

“A nation’s culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people.”

Mahatma Gandhi

“Dance is the only art of which we ourselves are the stuff of which it is made.”

Ted Shawn

FILM FACTS:

- MARTHA & NIKI had its world premiere as the opening film at the 2015 Nordisk Panorama Film Festival in Malmö, Sweden. The film went on to screen at other prestigious festivals like IDFA, the Docpoint Helsinki Documentary Film Festival, and Doc Leipzig, among others.
- During its 2016 film festival run, MARTHA & NIKI was honored with the Tempo Documentary Award at the Tempo Documentary Film Festival in Stockholm and the award for Best Documentary at the Durban International Film Festival.
- Based in Paris, France, Juste Debout is the largest street dance event in the world. In an attempt to meet increasing demand, the event now tours to countries all around the world, from China to Brazil, Slovakia to Mumbai. There are also two Juste Debout street dance schools, one in Paris and another in Toulouse.
- In 2010, the Swedish duo Martha Nabwire and Niki Tsappos became the first female competitors to become the champions of the hip-hop dance competition Juste Debout.
- According to Joseph G. Schloss' anthropological study "Foundation: B-boys, B-girls, and Hip-Hop Culture In New York," b-boying came to fruition in the Bronx during the late 1970s and spread like wildfire with the increasing popularity of block parties and hip-hop music.
- The producers of MARTHA & NIKI have taken an interesting route for distribution, opting to make the film globally available via Video-on-Demand on Vimeo.
- A recent study conducted by Sociologist Gerald Mollenhorst of Utrecht University in the Netherlands suggests that, as people's lives change and diverge, they generally replace their friends with new friends after a period of seven years, much like Martha and Niki began to do as their priorities in life differ from one another.
- Martha and Niki, while no longer a dance duo, continue to pursue solo careers in hip-hop dance. As of early 2017, Martha took part in The Culture of Hype & Hope event in the Netherlands, teaching masterclasses, judging the hip-hop competition, and giving a lecture on hip-hop dancing, while Niki was most recently a co-host at Juste Debout Nordic 2017 in Oslo, Norway.
- Dancing has a wide range of physical and mental benefits, including increased strength; improved balance; and better coordination, agility and flexibility. Plus, a study by the "New England Journal of Medicine" recently reported that dancing frequently provided the greatest risk reduction of any activity studied—cognitive or physical—reducing the risk by 76%.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Dance!** Whether you are going out for a night on the town with friends or are alone at home and feel like letting loose, put on some music that makes you want to get your groove on, and crank it up!
2. **Express** yourself. Whether it be through dance, music, writing, painting, spoken word, or any other form of creative expression, find your voice and speak your truth.
3. **Watch** Martha and Niki's numerous other performances online. On the [MARTHA & NIKI](#) film website, the filmmakers have linked to many performances from over the years, including solo acts.
4. **Donate** to dance educators. Dance studios like New York City's [Liberated Movement](#) which operate exclusively on donations while providing an immense depth of educational range, from ballet to hip-hop, and everything in between.
5. **Host a screening.** The director of MARTHA & NIKI, has decided to make the film available (for a small screening fee) for closed screenings at dance events, workshops, and/or other gatherings.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.