

By Alyson Osborne

CONTEXTUAL PRE SHOW NOTES:

This 5-minute film features the work of Atlanta's Leland Thorpe, founder and captain of Dance Champz, a J-Sette dance troupe. The film takes place at various outdoor settings around Atlanta where the dancers practice and perform, and also uses archival footage of Jackson State University halftime performances by their dance squad, and video from several different J-Sette competitions. Dance Champz as captured in the video is made up of six Black dancers, three of whom are highlighted in this film: Leland, a bald man with a full ebony beard; Darrius Stephens, co-captain of Dance Champz, has short buzz-cut hair; and Ter'Schard Harris, the youngest of this trio, has shoulder length hair in tendrils. Most of the scenes feature the dancers in their costumes: elaborate and uniquely designed skintight creations made of spandex that show off their fitness and flexibility to best effect. The dance in this film is graceful, fun and full of athleticism. The movement is very rapid and highly stylized, and tends to be straight and sharp, with softer moves juxtaposed to punctuate. For example: dancers may snap forward crisply with a flat back, and then undulate up with curvature. Overall the moves resemble a blend of drill team, voguing, ballet and gymnastics.

CONTENT DESCRIPTION: Three Black dancers in black masks, T-shirts, pants and athletic shoes. They strut down a city street in unison, left hands remaining on their hips, while right hands snap sassy on the diagonal, crossing from left shoulder down to out past the right hip and back again. They turn their heads to the right as their right arms swing out, and turn to face front again as it crosses back up to the left.

TEXT: During the pandemic, the Dance Champz of Atlanta have formed a quarantine pod together, and test for COVID regularly.

TEXT: Leland Thorpe - Founder and Captain - Dance Champz of Atlanta.

Leland faces the camera to speak. As he says "Welcome to Atlanta," the camera quickly cuts back to the three dancers on the street. They pivot to face a slow-moving car and various urban Atlanta images quickly flicker like a strobe. The camera cuts back to Leland; he hits a pose with his hand at head height, bent at the wrist, palm down, fingers pointing away from his face. Cut to the trio in form-fitting stretch silver crop tops with white fringe at the neck, and tight blue poly knit shorts. They dance against the railing of an overpass, with downtown Atlanta in the background. Arms are bent and quickly swivel from hip to side to head, forming triangles against the body. The slender silhouette of Ter'Schard is in slow motion, sauntering in a twisting walk along a covered walkway. The three dancers in black tees luxuriously arch their backs as in a yawning stretch, eyes closed, smooth their left hands around the backs of their heads, then pop into a stance with both arms straight out in front. The film cuts to the three on a shady sidewalk in mid-pirouette, left legs bent back parallel to the ground. They land it, then shift weight and high kick straight to the side with their right legs. Arms are overhead. They are wearing black unitards, modified in a unique peek-a-boo style. The center is cut away to reveal the torso. The

right side is cut short at the upper thigh. The left side is a full legging with a big scoop cut out in front, baring the thigh to the knee, where it then cuts away to reveal the front of the calf. The costumes are trimmed in a silver band at the chest, at the hem of the shorts, and along the left leg. White fringe runs along the right hip. They wear black leather mid-calf booties with silver accents and fringe. The three move into a flamboyant pose in their silver and blue costumes in front of red, white and blue “Welcome to Little Five Points” mural. Leland is in profile, the sun behind him, in a sculpted, arched back pose. He wears black leggings trimmed in red sequins and a red mesh tee. Another dancer in the same costume with waist-length microbraids marches in a high step, foot pointed, and makes a graceful twist, lithe arms swinging in opposition to torso. All six dancers—same costuming—stride in formation on grass. These leggings feature a left leg cutaway design similar to the black and silver unitard, although in this version the right leg is full length rather than short, and the scooped cutouts are trimmed in red. We see an overhead view of six dancers in a rainbow-painted crosswalk, then the camera cuts to a slow motion medium-close shot of dancers in the crosswalk sashaying toward the camera.

INTRO SEQUENCE:

The screen divides into a horizontal triptych for the video series’ title sequence—on top is a street level view of a dancer’s leg and sneaker spinning and rotating across the frame; in the middle, a queer Black male vogue dancer flips his long braids as he swiftly waves his arms and the words “If Cities Could Dance” appear over his image; and on the bottom, three women dancers of color stand in line and arch back, cradling one another. The words, “our history, our culture, our moves” appears over a montage of quick cut dancers from across the country, including a jookin’ dancer, a Native American (Seneca and Muscogee Creek) hoop dancer in eagle formation; two Chicago footworkers dancing in sync; and a trio of hip-hop dancers performing group choreography in front of a street mural with graffiti art. The sequence culminates with queer cis woman vogue dancer looking into the camera, waving her arms and pointing her finger toward the viewer. Leland runs on the grass and launches into a grand jete.

TEXT: Atlanta J-Setting Downtown Atlanta in background

A succession of quick shots: the camera pans along a neighborhood full of trees, hedges, and dormered homes; “I am somebody” painted in yellow on low brick wall; a “Black Trans Lives Matter” flag on a porch; a mural of a John Lewis mug shot next to his “good trouble, necessary trouble” quote; Leland jumps in place into a high kick, his leg close to his ear, arms straight out to the sides; downtown Atlanta with grassy park full of trees in foreground. Darrius in the black and red costuming with a T-shirt that reads “Champz Atlanta.” He takes crisp steps with vigorous arms. He bends and snaps up with one arm overhead; kicks; bends low and swoops up in a circular move, stiff arms crossed at wrists at forehead; swiveling his hips and taking strong steps.

TEXT: Darrius Stephens - Co-Captain, Dance Champz of Atlanta

A succession of shots: All six dancers high-step marching in a follow-the-leader line; in a cluster, arms overhead; Darrius, Ter'Schard and Leland each solo freestyle; slow motion shot of Leland jumping into a straddle; as a group with arms on each other's shoulders, step-kick and traverse sideways, then jump and twist in place, and repeat sequence. They break apart, pivot, and go into a modified jumping jack, hands clasped overhead. Quick flashes of downtown street art and murals, transitions to the trio dressed in black pants and tees dancing in front of a John Lewis mural. They arch backs, jut chests, and thrust hips. Arms are forceful in a pumping action and hands are clenched or clasped. The rigorous dance suddenly slows, and they slowly float their arms upward, fingers balletic and graceful. As a narrator mentions forming a pod together, the trio has formed a circle in front of a joyful colorful mural. They raise their arms and tip their heads back, eyes closed. Each dancer slowly pulls up their mask. Leland's reads "I am Black excellence" with a yellow crown. Ter'Schard's reads "I can't breathe," and Darrius' has a rainbow flag and the letters "LGTBQ."

Cut to all six dancers on the grass in a circle, hands on shoulders. They high kick to the side in unison, then one-by-one, like falling dominoes. Standing in formation, Leland breaks away and marches with swiveling hips directly toward the camera. Video footage of Jackson State University J-Sette dance team. They wear black bras and short shorts, connected down the middle by a thin black strap. Metallic trim glints off their costumes, and they wear brilliant gold footwear. They jump in place with knees together. Quick cut to a straddle jump, landing in the splits. Cut to the packed stands, the band playing from the bleachers. The band marches across the field in JSU letter formation. Cut to the JSU dancers in shimmering gold halters, pearlized bikini bottoms, and white gloves. They make deep swoops and jump in place. Lying on their backs, they straddle their legs in the air. Cut to a shimmy and jutting hips, which cuts seamlessly to the Dance Champz doing a similar move on the grass. In a line, they alternate popping out to the side. The camera cuts to a packed stadium, the JSU dancers in a backbend wearing oyster-colored leotards deeply cut away to reveal most of the midriff and back. Dance Champz on the grass break out of their line formation, kick forward, snap forward, swoop up. Puffy clouds fill and float through the sky. Slow motion footage of the dancers helping each other into their costumes—zipping up backs, buttoning cuffs. Overhead shot of the six sprightly dancers in the rainbow crosswalk, cuts to sashay toward camera. Under a huge shade tree along a walkway, the three dancers travel forward in jump squats, making big side circles with their arms, like front to back lassoing. Several people with camera phones have stopped to observe. Three photos of Leland: in a class photo in front of his high school; in his green, gold and white band uniform; and wearing distressed jeans in a group dance performance. Back at the shaded area in their black and silver costumes. In profile, bent knees and arms, elbows out, then right arm up in the air, hand in a fist making small circles. Arms snap to sides and they bend forward and circle tightly. Then arms move in a stylized circle along their sides, like a train. They lean forward, resting their forearms on the hips of the dancer in front. They straighten and spin, and form a line facing the camera. Ter'Schard, in front, high kicks and holds his leg perpendicular. Darrius is in the back and helps lift Leland into a straddle. They break apart and reform to vogue.

A succession of quick shots: clouds; a family of four strolling along a sidewalk; a Ferris wheel; a myriad of Black Lives Matter tees at a street market; Georgia State University. Archival footage plays of a catwalk with fuchsia lighting. J-Sette dancers perform in long-sleeved blue leotards with scooped cutaway backs. More dance in gold lamé unitards with cutaway sections. Another wears purple velvet pants and a sequined halter. Darrius in the fringed snug silver crop top makes a peace sign held horizontal at his temple, like a cat eye. He stares straight at the camera with a hint of a wry smile. Back to the catwalk: a J-Sette dance team in cotton leotard color combinations of hot pink, powder blue and white. The dancers in long-sleeve blue leotards are in a line along the runway. They do a half back flip onto their hands, and quickly flip over onto all fours, backs raised. They spring back onto their hips and straddle. Focus is on one dancer who stands and kicks both feet into the air sideways, then lands, spins, somersaults, and skips up into a low backbend. Hands behind him, he alternates slapping them on the floor. He straightens, pivots, and sassy struts toward the foot of the runway with one hand on hip and the other aloft, as the rest of his team files back on to continue dancing.

Cut to downtown Atlanta in traffic, seen from inside a car. As the “Jay to the ess-ee-double-tee-ee, you can’t J-Sette better than me” chant plays, the film shows the three dancers in slow motion, leaping and kick-stepping, arms overhead. In the background is a swirly pink mural that reads “Make it suck less” in a retro, highly stylized fat font. Cut to a dance team on stage in white track suits with black stripes on the legs and across the chest. Hands in the air, the dancers do a quick spin, bend slightly, place hands on thighs and quickly circle their heads; long hair twirls like tassels. A team in neon yellow chartreuse tank tops and shorts wears fanny packs in the front. Rapid chest isolations move in and out, they make stiff forward bends with arms at their sides like bowing. Cut to more downtown shots: the Olympic rings statuary in blue, yellow, black, green, and red; the Ferris wheel along a tree-lined street; in between tall buildings; Leland dancing solo with the Fox Theatre in the background. In a parade: dancers wear deep marine blue skin-tight sleeveless crop tops, satiny white short shorts and white booties. Graceful waving arms, undulating shimmy, and snappy toe-touch. A pride float glides by, sponsored by AARP. Both young and older adults are on the float, many in rainbow clothing. A sporty white convertible rolls by with a smiling woman with auburn ringlets in the passenger seat. She holds a sign that reads “Black Trans Lives Matter,” and holds out her arm to embrace a man who runs up from the sidelines to kiss her on the cheek. Dancers wear charcoal grey unitards cut away to reveal midribs. They squat strut, pumping their arms out from their chests, then circle them overhead in a lasso motion, using the momentum to spin. Dancers are in purple iridescent mesh unitards that go down to thigh length; they wear black gloves. Their movement focuses on fluid hand moves and elongated arms.

Cut to the trio in their silver and blue costumes, back at the railing of the overpass overlooking downtown Atlanta. They dance in a row during this segment, sometimes in profile. Bent arms quickly move from hip to side to head, forming triangles. They bend forward, fist pump back, then turn 180 degrees and high kick, legs touching their faces. They scoot backwards with pushing arms, then turn to face downtown, backs to the camera. Their moves are snappy and

sassy with lots of arching backs, cocked knees and jutting hips. Big circling arms cross and tuck in front as the trio bends at the waist and swoops in a circle. As they straighten, the camera focuses on their faces, each with a dynamic, flirty, energetic expression. Darrius on the end begins to blow a kiss and the camera pans back along all three continuing to J-Sette with a combination of sliding and staccato moves. The routine ends with a pop into a vogue pose with their left hands in the sideways peace sign cat eye. An aerial view of downtown with trees in the foreground surrounds the lawn where the Dance Champz practice. A wide view narrows to show the linked dancers traveling in unison with a bouncy step-kick-step. They break apart, swing their arms overhead, bend, pop up, and chug their arms to the side to form an "L" shape.

The film ends and credits roll.