

Review: Emily Branham's 'Being BeBe'

BY JOEY KEOGH ON JUNE 7, 2022



BeBe Zahara Benet is best known as the first ever winner of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Nowadays, the beloved reality competition show is a world-renowned juggernaut, with numerous international spinoffs, an "All-Stars" edition and even a dedicated annual convention. Back in 2009, when BeBe emerged victorious, *RuPaul's Drag Race* was a fledgling title on the niche, queer-focused network LogoTV. Re-watching footage from that time now, the show seems kind of quaint. But BeBe stood out from the get-go, regardless of the low production value (season 1 looks like it was shot with Vasline smeared on the camera lens) and even lower stakes (in the finale, RuPaul hands over a crown like BeBe is about to take over a drag empire, something the the legendary host stopped doing almost immediately).

Being BeBe, the feature directorial debut of documentarian Emily Branham, winningly charts 15 years of the esteemed drag performer's career, splicing archival footage with present-day reactions from the lady herself. BeBe, aka Nea Marshall Kudi, is a native of Cameroon, as anyone who watched her on *RuPaul's Drag Race* can attest (the hilarious refrain "Cameroooooooon!" followed her everywhere she went after the show) by way of Minneapolis. BeBe's act was always heavily influenced by the culture of her home country, which marked her out as something special right away. But it also stymied her career down the line, as Kudi was encouraged to take elocution lessons and Americanize his performances, to earn more money and appeal to wider audiences. Unsurprisingly, the Minnesotan was unable to deny his true self.

[Read More at VV — Review: Adrian Shergold's 'Cordelia'](#)



Branham is given unprecedented access into Marshall/Bebe's world. Despite the challenges of filming during the COVID-19 pandemic, she retains a direct connection to her subject, sensitively teasing everything out even as viewers learn that "BeBe hates being vulnerable." Indeed, *Being BeBe* is a huge step forward for a performer who still refuses to be drawn on her personal life, providing an insight into the struggles Kudi faced after winning *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which long-time fans of the show will be shocked by, since these days even losing catapults performers to the upper echelons of fame, thanks predominantly to the advent of social media. Back then, BeBe had to continue working hard to prove herself. She's very pragmatic, though, and is never shown having a pity party even when things seem dire. Right at the beginning of the film, BeBe quips, "Right now, I am unemployed, how 'bout that?" — a reference to the pandemic's devastating impact on the drag industry.

Regardless of the situation, BeBe remains incredibly witty, self-confident and quick. Her sisters describe her as god's gift to them first, and then the world, while her elderly parents, both academics, are clearly in awe of their son's ability to put it all out there onstage. And in one genuinely astounding scene, Kudi transforms into BeBe on the spot — without the benefit of hair, makeup or anything else — in front of his gobsmacked acting class. He makes subtle changes, such as changing his seating position, but the impact is powerful. *Being BeBe* is an immigrant story too, and alongside telling the subject's story and that of her extended family, Branham also shares the perspectives of queer people still living in Cameroon, many of whom leave their identities obscured for fear of retaliation. As an LGBTQ+ activist explains, someone was jailed in the notoriously homophobic country for drinking Bailey's because it was considered a "girly" tippie denoting homosexuality.

[Read More at VV — Know the Cast: 'Fire Island'](#)



Being BeBe's structure is very clever because, either due to COVID-19 restrictions or necessity, it allows the subject to look back over everything that's already been filmed and react in real time. Thus, she gets to see the impact she's had on people like a gay Cameroon couple, whom the drag superstar video-chats with one point, first hand, sweetly letting them know that she's equally inspired by their courage. After over a decade of toil, much of which involved BeBe working all day and doing drag at night, it's comforting to watch her taking a step back to truly appreciate everything she's achieved thus far, especially since it's unlikely BeBe has had a chance to do so since she first embarked on this crazy journey. *Being BeBe* succeeds not just because its central subject is so intriguing and likable, but because Branham knows precisely how to capture the subject's energy, and when to encourage Kudi to reveal something deeper.

The archival footage, aside from providing a fly-on-the-wall look at BeBe's backstage routine, also presents a wonderful juxtaposition between then and now, demonstrating just how far the subject has truly come. Naturally, the new footage has the best quality, but BeBe herself gets gradually more glamorous and sleeker, too, even though she does her in-person interviews, in the present day, out of drag. At one point, Kudi even jokes about how much better looking he is nowadays. The footage of Cameroon, meanwhile, clearly captured on the hop, provides a stark counterpoint to BeBe's relatively comfortable life stateside, even if a visit to the George Floyd memorial brings her crashing back down to earth about how unsafe Black people still are in the United States.

[Read More at VV — Soundtracks of Cinema: 'Fire Island'](#)



Considering the reserved and demure nature of BeBe Zahara Benet, both on and offstage, it's impressive that Branham gained access to her inner world. *Being BeBe* is full of heart, soul and wit — much like the subject herself — and provides a fascinating glimpse behind the curtain for fans and curious newcomers alike; a joy-filled, life-affirming must-watch.

***Being BeBe* is now available on VOD, and will make its broadcast premiere June 21 on Fuse.**