

FILM REVIEW

Let's Get the Rhythm!: The Life and Times of Miss Mary Mack. Directed by Irene Chagall (New York: Women Make Movies/City Lore & Public Art Films, 2014, 53 mins., color.).

Director Irene Chagall's *Let's Get the Rhythm!: The Life and Times of Miss Mary Mack* covers familiar folkloric territory: hand-clapping and rhythm games among young girls. The wide-ranging film frames rhythmic play as something inherent to human beings, particularly girls, with foundations in psychology and anthropology and connected to other forms of artistic expression. Chagall takes her camera around the world and through long stretches of human history to develop the film's thesis that clapping games are serious business for the girls who play them and that such games are worthy of focused attention. Students of other social sciences will find as much to contemplate in the film as folklorists, a testament to the richness of source materials and scholarship found in its hour-long running time. While Chagall offers a great deal of enriching context, *Let's Get the Rhythm!* also leaves a number of avenues unexplored and unresolved, creating both a problem for a viewer who wants more and an opportunity for ongoing scholarly work.

As an instructor in San Francisco's Community Music Center specializing in children's musical education, Chagall spent thirty years working with city youth and learning about the music they create. Her study of that rhythmic expression earned her a Smithsonian Research Fellowship, and she spent several years assembling footage from archival sources and gathering her own fieldwork. Chagall knows she is not covering new ground at a broad level, and draws upon Bess Lomax Hawes' 1967 film, *Pizza Pizza Daddy-O* frequently for both footage and conceptual underpinnings about the role of hand-clapping among girls. Hawes herself is a frequent onscreen presence, giving her perspectives on the interpretation of the game-playing rituals shown to the audience in both her own film and in Chagall's examples. The film's other experts include Kyra Gaunt, author of *The Games Black Girls Play*, and Ellen Dissanayake, author of *Art and Intimacy*, as well as experts from fields, including African Art history and cultural anthropology. Methodologically, the film presents copious ethnographic footage of girls playing the games or speaking about the games.

Some elements of the film work remarkably well to serve both Chagall's thesis and the viewer's understanding of the clapping games in local and global contexts. One particularly engaging sequence follows the game "Hello Operator," a game that traffics in near-miss ribaldry, through around a dozen different iterations, including historical and contemporary versions played among girls from different age groups, localities, and backgrounds. At the heart of the film are questions about how society values its girls and their culture, and the cultural habit of discounting such games as "mere play." Chagall deftly demonstrates the ways that

the games not only create social bonds among the girls who play them—as shown when an American girl travels to Tanzania to meet a pen pal and plays clapping games to break the ice with the local girls—but also address large-scale cultural and social issues. One of Chagall's interviewees makes the point that the games are a form of “graffiti with your hands,” a motif reflected in the paint-splash palm prints used to accentuate onscreen text in the film. Clapping games, demonstrates Chagall, can address problems like Jim Crow segregation or the high incidence of sickle cell anemia in Sierra Leone, where the girls play a clapping game called “Ah Mella Sickle Cella.” Chagall's particular exploration of rhythmic-clap sophistication among children elevates the discussion of the games. Informants like Hawes and jazz musician Bobby Sanabria repeatedly show that these games are not always simple, but often require a very sophisticated understanding of patterns and rhythm. The clapping patterns in a game called “Numbers,” which requires ever-more complex rhythms as the girls play it, appears onscreen as an equation. The informants, largely children and teens from diverse cultural backgrounds, come largely from American cities like San Francisco and New York but also from international locations including Japan, South Korea, Mexico, Brazil, Russia, Spain, and Israel, do much to reinforce Chagall's points about the pervasive importance of the games. A strong current of what Nina Glick-Schiller and others have termed “cosmopolitan sociability” pervades the presentation, too, offering a way of contextualizing what the viewer sees as a transnational phenomenon.

The film's wide range of subjects, experts, and ideas all keep it lively and engaging, but do sacrifice some depth to meet the timeframe. A number of speculative points in the film appear and disappear with a frustrating evanescence. Chagall relates Egyptian hieroglyphics to the hand-clapping games she records, but the claim has only a small piece of interpretive text to stand on, and seems as flimsy as William Wells Newell's claim that girls play these sorts of games merely to warm their hands in the winter. Similarly, Ellen Dissanayake attempts to connect hand-clapping with the production of oxytocin in the body, and then makes some sweeping claims about gender roles related to that hormone. Gender also becomes problematic, as one self-described “tomboy” struggles to connect with the hand-clapping rhymes, which has the—hopefully unintended—effect of making her look “broken” as a woman because of her limited ability to interact through the games. Chagall does explore the ways in which girls' games get appropriated by men, particularly in popular music, but interestingly presents a pair of girls later playing a game that clearly appropriates a portion of K.C. & the Sunshine Band's “That's the Way I Like It” without discussing the folkloric process of that counter-appropriation. Strangely, despite the film's subtitle, the actual discussion of the game “Miss Mary Mack” occupies only about ten minutes of the film's runtime.

Such unexplored, underexplored, or problematic presentations read much more like opportunities for future scholars, however, than any sort of failure on Chagall's part. The immense scope of *Let's Get the Rhythm!* necessarily requires a tight editorial hand in order to accommodate the timeframe of the presentation. Chagall's previous work on the subject, published in 2005/2006's *Children's Folklore Review*, presented a rough draft of the film's thesis while answering some of the questions the video version of her work merely skimmed, such as the issue

of counter-appropriation. In this article, Chagall quotes Simon Bronner on the evanescent but vital role these games play in the lives of young girls, noting that these games merge “performance and integration of different expressive behaviors that [defy] easy typology” (Bronner 1988:166). That typological defiance is clear in Chagall’s work as well, and students of folklore have no shortage of raw material or refined analysis available between her earlier article and this film. In the end, the film will likely be a strong future companion piece to Bess Lomax Hawes’ earlier work, and set the stage for scholars who follow to build upon what Chagall has done.

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Bronner, Simon. 1988. *American Children’s Folklore*. Little Rock: August House, quoted in Irene Chagall. 2005/2006. “Let’s Get Rhythm,” *Children’s Folklore Review* 28:42-63.