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FEATURES

Black Explosion 'Evolution' honors ballroom culture and the evolution of fashion

53rd-annual event highlights inclusivity through displaying queer and black culture



Photo by [MOAZ ELAZZAZI](#) | The Spectrum

Models pose on stage at Black Explosion.



By [AJ FRANKLIN](#)

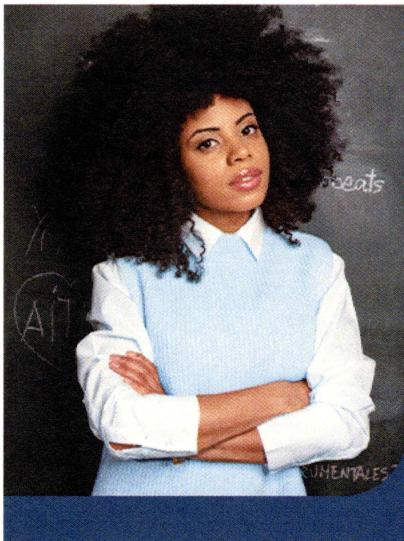
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The show has begun, with lights illuminating the lifted black stage and over 500 seats mostly filled with UB students waiting to be entertained. The audience is dressed to impress, wearing everything from formal attire to colorful tracksuits.



Behind the curtains, prior to her que to come on stage, Bianca St Cielen starts shaking and getting nervous, but this is normal for her. St Cielen, a senior biological sciences major and second-time model at the annual Black Explosion fashion show, will walk the stage three separate times during the event.



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When walking through the huge square stage, St Cielen was set on maintaining a straight face, showing off the designer pieces she is wearing and listening to her inner voice as it admonishes her: "do not trip."

She succeeds. Throughout her performances, she hits several poses that elicit mass cheering from the audience.

"[Black Student Union] really brought me out of my comfort zone," St Cielen said following the event. "Which is a really good thing because sometimes you're in your own little bubble. And it's not that fun and you can't really learn if you stay in your comfort bubble. [BSU] helped me along the way."

Black Explosion is UB's largest fashion show, held annually for the last 53 years — with the exception of 2021, when it was canceled due to COVID-19. BSU brought the show back in 2022, holding it at the Conference and Event Center in Niagara Falls on Sunday, March 6. Black Explosion's theme for this year, "Evolution," showcased diversity and several decades of fashion. Student performers were broken up into four groups called Aviance, Ninja, Ebony and Garcon. The event featured performances by Vogue Buffalo — a group of LGBTQ studio dancers — and rapper Jay Critch. The budget for the event was \$25,000, according to BSU President Josie Nimarko.

Clothing designers included Ty Ching, Ruby Denim, Raeana, Tempur Essence and Lamine. BSU explained the meaning behind each group that performed on their [Instagram](#). Aviance represented glamor, elegance, classiness and sophistication. Ninja represented stealthiness, sleekness, strength and fearlessness. Ebony represented the culture of the 1990s and 2000s: ghetto fashion, wildness and flashiness. Garcon represented flamboyance, colorfulness, boldness and extravagance.



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When Critch was announced, the remaining participants gathered around the stage. Some audience members even stood on chairs to get the best possible view of the show.

And when he entered the stage, phone cameras lit up every angle. The closer he got to the audience, the more the crowd cheered. Nimarko says the decision to invite Critch was born from "nostalgia" and the feelings his mid-to-late-2010s music evokes.

Nimarko says that one of BSU's primary objectives for this year's event was to show a "different side of Black culture."

That 'different side' was spotlighted when Vogue Buffalo took the stage. Their performance was heavily influenced by the LGBTQ ballroom scene. For decades, ballroom culture has served as a space for queer racial minorities to express themselves to the fullest extent without the feeling of being looked down on by society.

The crowd's energy was more abundant than any moment prior when Vogue Buffalo's performers came out. The crowd's reactions felt akin to that of a roller coaster where every physical drop by the performers — whether a split or bouncing up and down — elicited screams of awe from the crowd. The crowd was hyped every time a new performer came on stage.

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Nimarko says there was "a lot" of planning that went into this year's Black Explosion event. The hard work paid off for Nimarko when she saw BSU's plan come to life. For her, the event was "a really good experience."

For one of the event's two hosts — Smitty Smith — this year's Black Explosion ranks as one of the most honorable things he has done during his time at UB.

When BSU asked Smith, a junior history major, to host the event, he got emotional.

"I almost shed a tear, a little bit," Smith said. "It gave me a feeling like who am I to be hosting such an event?"

Smith is not new to hosting events; he has hosted several parties in the Buffalo area and an event in the Student Union Theater. But Black Explosion stood out for Smith. He says the event showed him that, "there are different ways to represent Black culture. Not just being African American or being from New York."

The event furthered Smith's belief that there needs to be increased LGBTQ representation and supportiveness in the Black community. He called being able to host such a meaningful event "a very humbling experience."

For performers like Smith, Black Explosion is an event like no other that allows students, especially racial minorities, to express some of their extracurricular talents on a major platform.

This article has been updated to address a misspelling.

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