

Mourad Merzouki Brings Hip-Hop Dance to the Olympic Stage in the Heart of Paris

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. *AP Entertainment Writer*

CRETEIL, France (AP) — In a sweltering enclosed stage, several dancers perform synchronized routines before scattering, as others practice twisting handstands and tumbles. Amid this, Mourad Merzouki directs them, ensuring their hip-hop moves are flawless.

It's the final day of rehearsals for the renowned French-Algerian choreographer and his energetic group of dancers who are prepared themselves for a huge Olympic Games festivity. Merzouki and his dance troupe took enter stage near the Eiffel Tower in Paris, showcasing the official dance of the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games on Monday.

The four-day event marks a triumphant

in both himself and his dancers because of the positive message he's trying to convey.

"I have a lot of pressure, because I want everything to go right," he said. "We want the message of generosity of this dance to raise awareness to as many people as possible. This moment should allow us all to connect."

From humble beginnings to a global platform, Merzouki's innovative style took some time to gain widespread appeal. He started his dance company in 1996, naming it after his inaugural piece, Käfig, which means "cage" in Arabic and German. Merzouki was told his dance style wouldn't resonate or maintain the attention of large audiences in Europe.

However, he received a different response while dancing in the United States, in cities such as Miami, Los Angeles and

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moment for Merzouki, 50, whose hip-hop style, once doubted 30 years ago, has now proven its lasting appeal.

"It's great to see that hip-hop dance will be one of the major events watched by the whole world," said Merzouki shortly after rehearsals at a choreographic center in Créteil, a suburb of Paris. His showcase was held in front of 13,500 attendees at the Trocadéro Champions Park, a free access arena where his choreographed performance that featured 30 dancers and urban artists.

"Spectators were on their feet to applaud these artists from all horizons — dancers, acrobats and circus artists," he said. "It was a real pleasure for us to feel and see the place of dance in this major sporting event."

Merzouki's dance routine is one of three styles featured on the stage at Champions Park, where Olympic medalists arrive. His choreography blends the elements of martial arts, visual arts, circus, boxing and live arts, tailored to engage audiences of all ages and abilities.

Despite the weight of expectations, Merzouki remains confident

New York, the birthplace of hip-hop. In America, Merzouki's unique style was widely embraced, and he could have thrived there. But he chose to return to France to challenge doubters and break down barriers.

Merzouki eventually succeeded in doing just that. His company has had more than 4,000 performances in France and more than 60 other countries in a three-decade span.

"I think that this recognition is due to these 30 years that we have all spent fighting, holding on, believing in our dreams," he said. "It's so that precisely this dance can have a place like any other dance in the choreographic landscape."

Throughout the years, Merzouki has kept his routines fresh with an open mind while selecting dancers — even asking those interested to submit dance videos via YouTube. He's worked with reliable dancers and inserted new ones too with backgrounds in hip-hop, contemporary, classical and circus.

"It's a sign that this dance can be addressed to all audiences," he continued. "With this competition, I think we can



Dancers rehearse for "Dance of the Games" at the concert hall in Creteil, east of Paris, Wednesday July 31, 2024. Mourad Merzouki is bringing hip-hop dance to the Paris Olympics. The French-Algerian choreographer is the creator of the "Dance of the Games." Merzouki's showcase at the Trocadéro Champions Park kicks off Monday Aug. 5, 2024.

say that it's an honor and that it's encouraging for the future of this dance."

French dancer Joël Luzolo called Merzouki an influential figure who brought his dance style from the streets to the theater. He said many dancers wouldn't have sustainable careers without Merzouki's impact.

"Back then, it was way harder than now," said Luzolo, 30, who has danced for Merzouki for five years. "Every year, he tries to raise the level even higher to make people understand what hip-hop is and what it

can be. He's been a really great influence. It can help dancers with having a career and life."

Merzouki is grateful for the reemergence of the breakdancing culture, which is debuting as a competitive event during the Paris Games — though some in Paris' local breaking scene were skeptical of the subculture being coopted by officials, commercialized and put through the rigid judging structure.

"Some were for it, some were against it. But I think it's very good news that breaking was pro-

pelled to the forefront into such an important event," he said. "The DNA of breaking and hip-hop dance is competition. It was battles. It's a continuation of this great story of hip-hop. I hope the visibility will allow this dance to be better recognized and reach a larger, wider audience."

After the Olympics showcase, Merzouki will focus on his new show called "Beauséjour" in Lyon, France. He has upcoming projects with different orchestras, collaborating with several artists and just creating

as much as possible.

With grand plans up his sleeve, Merzouki is ready to present his artistic dance to the Olympic world.

"I hope that the public, who thinks hip-hop dance is not for them, can discover a new discipline they necessarily didn't know," he said. "This is a great moment of visibility. ... The symbolism is strong. It's an artistic recognition. French youth from working class neighborhoods, dancing in the heart of Paris."



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