

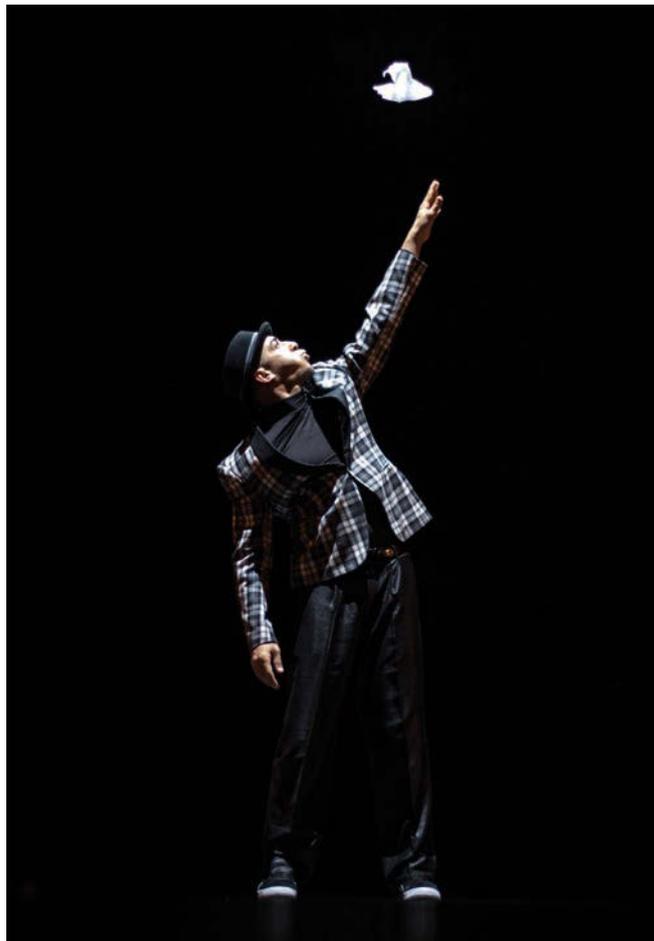
Breakin' Convention

Sadler's Wells, London – May 6, 2018

BREAKIN' CONVENTION TURNED 15 this year – an impressive milestone for this constantly evolving, and notably inclusive, festival of hip hop. Both local and international, and an event well versed in formal traditions while also pushing boundaries, it's a joyful demonstration of this dance style's range; appropriate, writes founder and host Jonzi D in the May issue of *Dancing Times*, since in hip hop, "nobody expects you to be the same as anybody else".

Jonzi D also notes the festival has been vital in developing hip hop as a theatrical form, giving a platform to more diverse artists and spectators, and challenging the notion that styles such as ballet are automatically the basis of dramatic movement. That's a complex ongoing discussion, but there's no doubt *Breakin' Convention* has demonstrated how compelling, thrilling and even moving hip hop dance theatre can be – and that a refreshingly mixed audience responds in kind. "Real hip hop is all of us," proclaimed Jonzi D. Not always the message communicated from our dance stages.

Part of the event's success stems from openness to fusion, and artistic collaboration was baked into this anniversary show, which joined forces with Jazz:refreshed – also celebrating 15 years. The main stage first half followed the usual format – showcasing a variety of rising and established talent – and then dedicated the second half to a jazz-infused hip hop medley.



First-half acts included BirdGang, a slick crew from the UK who debuted at *Breakin' Convention* in 2006, and continue to grow; the ferociously energetic, acrobatic and dancehall-referencing Jamaican b-boys Extreme Pushers; French legend Salah, whose work with the likes of Cirque du Soleil and David Blaine was evident in his consummate storytelling and showmanship; and Slovenian internet sensation Željko Božić, who joined forces with Miljan Nojic for a whimsical duet.

It was also heartening to see the festival's usual strong female presence. Los Angeles-based Femme Fatale brought a trendy feminine edge and effective musicality to crisp popping and animation, while Kloé Dean's collective Myself UK Dance provided dynamic lyrical street style. Waacking specialists House of

Above: Salah dancing at the 2018 edition of *Breakin' Convention* at Sadler's Wells.

Absolute paid soulful tribute to Dizzy Gillespie, and Elsabet Yonas demonstrated empowerment through both individual purpose and shared experience.

Perhaps the first-half highlight was French choreographer Amala Dianor's New School – in a style he calls "Abstract", since it's an exploratory hybrid that references hip hop. In practice, it was deconstructed b-boying danced with razor-sharp technical precision: simply spellbinding.

Many of these pieces – and those performed in the Lilian Baylis Studio – tackled provocative topics, something else that has become an admirable facet of *Breakin' Convention*. In 2018, they ranged from mental health and slavery to family

problems, racial identity and abusive relationships. It's a firm rejoinder to those who might dismiss this style as purely crowd-pleasing tricks – though plenty of those were on display as well. In fact, some of these subjects seemed best explored in a style rooted in the cultures they most affected: authenticity in both experience and voice.

However, serious intent and well-honed skill can also provide exhilarating entertainment, as was on magnificent display in the main stage second half. The presence of a live band, the Jazz:refreshed Sonic Orchestra playing wonderful commissioned work by leader Jason Yarde, added another dimension, allowing for dialogue between dancers and musicians. Jonzi D even got in on the action.

French soloist Mufasa was superbly matched with singer and cellist Ayanna Witter-Johnson, in a slinky, sensual exchange between two commanding women; an unexpected piece, and a great change of pace. At the other end of the scale were the UK's lightning-fast Locksmiths – rhythmic and playful – and The Ruggeds from the Netherlands, pairing fearless flips, twists and windmills with beatboxing and propulsive drumming. Bringing it home in style was Boy Blue Entertainment, the company a prime example of how hip hop can succeed – and change perceptions – by venturing into new venues and partnerships. Almost 30 dancers, backed by the full orchestra, performed a pulsating, explosive piece that was still taut and perfectly unified: a liberation and a celebration. Here's to another 15 years.

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