



Hip-hop/Influences

June 2009: **Mourad Merzouki** is appointed director of the Centre Chorégraphique National, Creteil. A few months earlier, his peer Kader Atou had taken over as head of the CCN, La Rochelle. So, hip-hop made itself at home in these two lofty establishments of French contemporary dance. What an institutional seal of approval for this dance that had come up from the streets!

From tarmac to the boards of the stage, the route was still far from mapped out for hip-hop. Others had already tried to pass that way. Born on the sidewalks of New York in the late 1970s, this urban dance gained ground rapidly all over the world to become a global form of choreographic expression.

Climb aboard this Course and cruise the roads down which hip-hop developed. A melting-pot of cultures, fruit of movement and musical hybridisations, now – as ever – it continues to be nourished by new experiments.

1. Dance as challenge

Kamanda

Opening this Course with an extract from *Kamanda qu'en penses-tu*, a piece by the Ivory Coast choreographer **Georges Momboye**, might give the impression that hip-hop's roots are in African dance. But this would be a hasty and misleading shortcut. Originating in the black ghettos, hip-hop dance is just as much a product of American culture, forged in a social and cultural context specific to the United States during the 1970s. This extract nevertheless reminds us that millions of Africans were deported as slaves to American soil and today their descendants are part of the American nation. It also aims to evoke the initial basis of hip-hop's energy and dynamic: improvisation and challenge. In this extract, each of the dancers grabs a rhythmic hook thrown out by the percussionist and embarks on a series of movements, at times daring, increasing in speed to arrive at a virtuosic finish. All around, other dancers keep up the beat and shout encouragement, but remain ready at any moment to fall into step and show that they, too, are capable.

Break dance developed along similar lines. On the sidewalks of the Bronx, in the middle of a circle, youths from poor neighbourhoods came to challenge each other by improvising acrobatic movements and figures on the ground, to the sound of ghetto blasters. But something else was going on here: the choreographic emulation between dancers had replaced fist fights. Dance rather than violence!



Balé Folclórico de Bahia

The capoeiristas of the Balé Folclórico de Bahia, a Brazilian folk dance group, confront each other in a fight that is no more than a feint. Originally, capoeira, an expression of revolt against the Brazilian slave-owning society, allowed the slaves to train in combat while masking their martial art behind the appearance of a dance accompanied by music and songs. Here on stage, the dancers define the circular space – a *roda* – with leaps and acrobatic poses before moving on to the skilful game of attack and dodging. Circle, challenge, skill, all in rhythm: these are also the ingredients of hip-hop!

Jazz dance story

Before hip-hop, America had produced a style of music and dance which, in 1917, became known as “jazz”. In spite of the climate of racism and segregation which held sway between the white masters of European origin and their black slaves deported from Africa, the two communities observed each other and borrowed each other's rhythms and movements. So it was that military marches, jigs and quadrilles were mixed with dances known to the slaves, giving rise to jazz dances. Among these was tap dance, the result of crossing the struck steps of English clog dances and Irish reels, mixed with syncopated Afro-American rhythms.

Jazz Tap Ensemble

In *Interplay*, the two soloists of the Jazz Tap Ensemble compete with each other in skill (yet another challenge!), in line with the music. But when the band falls silent, this leaves the dancers totally free to improvise, who then go on to develop dazzling steps of increasing complexity.

This is what, in spite of their different registers, they have in common with hip-hop dancers: the capacity to improvise and the search for virtuosity.

Blue until June

Itself the fruit of crossover, jazz has always allowed other experiences to rub off on it. On Broadway, in the 1940s to 1960s, jazz dancers mingled with artists from the classical ballet and modern dance worlds. As a result of their exchanges, they created a new stage dance called Modern Jazz. Swaying hips, fluid torsos, isolation between the upper and lower body, between shoulder and head, are all characteristic of Modern Jazz. Traces of classical language, such as arabesques or rapid turns, can also be seen. The piece *Blue until June*, by the **Ballets Jazz de Montréal**, includes a *grand jeté*, leaps en attitude, and, most of all, the distinctly academic carriage of the head when moving around the stage.



2. From break to punching-ball

C'est ça la vie ?!

When hip-hop dancers reached the theatre stage in the 1990s, they began drawing on other artistic styles to renew their own art. Some feared that in doing this, hip-hop would lose its soul, its energy and dry up. Nothing of the sort. Proof of this can be seen in the piece *C'est ça la vie ?!*, by **Pokemon Crew**, some of whose members have won awards in the *battles* of international championships. In passing from the street to the stage, the main issue is to set the dance firmly at the heart of a coherent artistic intention. On the stage mat, the Pockemons' break dance reformulates itself into pas de deux and trios. It organises its contortionist and acrobatic innovations to work towards delivering a message, rendered legible by the addition of scenographic elements.

Boxe boxe

“Dance ‘with a message’ is not for me,” claims Mourad Merzouki, on the other hand. The Käfig company's choreographer is nevertheless keen “to offer hip-hop in a variety of diverse aspects and free it from the shackles of its origins”, where, as he sees it, it has been confined for a long time. And now, on the strength of many works that have attracted a good deal of attention in France and abroad, here he is taking up boxing as a metaphor for the choreographic act. In this extract from *Boxe boxe*, the circular space becomes the arena where the dancer confronts his own anxieties in battle. The vocabulary of break dance borrows new outlines and thereby sets up a poignant dialogue with the ground. For the audience, it's a knock-out!



To go further :

CAPOEIRA, Nestor, CHEZE, Gilles (trad.). *Le petit manuel de capoeira*. Noisy-sur-Ecole : Budo-Les Editions, 2003. 1 vol. (286 p.) + 1 CD-ROM (18 min).

MOÏSE, Claudine, MOURRAT, Philippe (collab.). *Danseurs du défi : rencontre avec le Hip Hop*. Montpellier : Indigène, cop. 1999. 144 p. (Indigène esprit).

SEGUIN, Eliane. *Histoire de la danse jazz*. Paris : Chiron, cop. 2003. 281 p.

VERNAY, Marie-Christine. *La danse Hip Hop*. Paris : Gallimard jeunesse, cop. 1998. 47 p. (Carnets de danse).

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The "Hip-Hop/Influences" THEMA was launched thanks the support of General Secretariat of Ministries and Coordination of Cultural Policies for Innovation.