



Let's dance!

Franco-Gabonese performer Herwann Asseh was the star bill of a festival in Libreville that showed Gabon to be at the peak of the wave of Africa's modern dance culture

THE STAR CAME on stage. With the superb physique of a top-class athlete, Franco-Gabonese performer Herwann Asseh has won a reputation as one of the world champions of Street Dance, a spectacular dance form originating in the United States which borrows from hip hop, gymnastics and martial arts.

The packed auditorium of Libreville's French Cultural Centre broke out in thunderous applause as the performer brought his presentation to a close. But no. Suddenly the audience did a double take. Asseh stopped throwing his death-defying somersaults and back-flips and stood up straight as a letter 'I'. His movements were slow now, and his voice, diffident at first, became louder as he started to tell the story of his life in disarmingly simple and sincere words.

Asseh has a complicated history, culturally speaking. His mother was French and his father Gabonese; he was born in Libreville in 1975 but left Africa as a child to grow up in Brittany, his maternal home. This hybridity of background is at the heart of his performance, giving it African and French aspects – a

double inheritance for which, as a child, he found himself both envied and singled out. It is this culture clash that he evokes in his work: a blend of cultures and a search for identity expressed in a choreographic language that is itself a fusion of styles.

In 99, a solo he developed during a stay as artist in residence in Libreville in 2007, he appeared naked, as if 'writing' himself. "A return to my roots, to my earliest, unique memories of childhood in Africa, then of my arrival in France and my totally disconnected life there," is how this talented dancer and choreographer described its message, saying he was moved to be appearing on stage in Gabon again.

This explains why 99 presented elements of hip hop, Brazilian capoeira (Asseh has studied dance in South America) and modern and traditional Gabonese dance. The year 1999, in which he founded his urban dance company Compagnie Moral Soul in Brest, France, was a turning point for him, leading him in a new direction with this synthesis of genres. It was an eclectic journey, appropriate for Libreville's third Festival of Contemporary Dance, at which he was guest of honour.

The young audience was enthralled by what he had to say →

and Sandrin Lekongui, the festival organiser, was jubilant. Gabon's first professional dancer and head of Juste Bouger Artistiquement au Gabon (JBAG), an organisation that promotes dance in Gabon, Mr Lekongui has, with support from the French Cultural Centre, been able to add an international dimension to this year's festival at which guest dance companies from Burkina Faso, Senegal, the Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon and France performed.

Congolese dancer Orchy Nzaba, who runs the choreographic workshop at the French Cultural Centre in Congo-Brazzaville performed his moving solo *Night shade* which won a Radio France Internationale prize in 2006. Nzaba was also winner of the 2006 choreography competition *Danse en Créations* held in Berlin – the most important platform for contemporary African dance.

My body is my light was the title of the piece presented by Gabonese dancer Peter Nkoghe which mixed dance with speech and in which he ran about the stage, lit by a scattering of small lamps, shouting "Light!", his hands reaching for the sky, as if to express existential yearning.

Gabonese dancer Amaël Mavoungou did a daring solo called *Duo Soli* for which, between two movements, his voice burst out to repeat the first letters of the alphabet "A, B, C, D" like a litany. Amazed at his own ability to speak, like an infant he became filled with joy, launching into a pure, powerful, almost crude dance. But his leaps of pleasure soon gave way to uncertainty.

Naked but for a short loincloth, he contorted himself and crawled over the stage. Finally, his unanswered utterances became a cry of despair and he grasped a jar filled with sand, pouring it over his head in silence.

Also wowing young Gabonese audiences was a line-up of top Gabonese hip hop groups. Hip hop, also known as rap, is a style of music that was born in the United States in the 1980s. It consists of two main components: rapping and DJ-ing. Along with breakdancing and urban-inspired graffiti art, these four elements make up hip hop culture, a movement initiated by inner-city youth that has taken Libreville by storm and evolved its own Gabonese flavour.

"There are some excellent dancers in Gabon and thanks to the rich mix of cultures, they dance in very different styles," says Guy Lacroix, director of the French Cultural Centre.

Mr Lekongui believes that in Gabon it is possible, to make a living from art. "I'm a perfect illustration of that," he says. "In life you have to be able to dream. I have been ambitious and been lucky enough to have proper training." He trained at the Centre National de la Danse in Paris and during the festival, he helped organise training workshops which merged traditional African and contemporary dance forms. "I want to pass on my dream and ambition to talented youngsters," he adds. ■

Marie Tarquin



Opening image and main image right: Herwann Asseh performs with his Compagnie Moral Soul. This page from left: a hip hop dancer; Gabonese dancer Amaël Mavoungou; hip hop dancers perform; Peter Nkoghe of Gabon mixed dance with speech

