



In this photo breakdancer Johanna Rodrigues performs a dance move on a street in Bangalore. —AFP photos

'Better than the boys': Indian b-girl flips norms in world title bid

Long before b-girl Johanna Rodrigues began improvising routines combining Indian classical dance with headstands and backflips in a quest to "redefine femininity", she found inspiration at home in her widowed mother. A rare female face on India's breakdancing scene, Rodrigues is representing the South Asian nation at this week's Red Bull BC One world championship in Mumbai, where she will battle 15 women and 16 men for the top prize.

Competing against men comes naturally to the 23-year-old yoga instructor, who grew up idolizing athletes like Usain Bolt and harbored dreams of becoming a runner. "We tend to limit girls by segregating them from boys at an early age—setting up different goalposts especially when it comes to things like athletics at school," she tells AFP. "I never understood it... maybe because I had a mother who did everything a man was expected to do and everything a woman was expected to do, whether it was fixing lightbulbs, going to work, riding a motorbike, cooking dinner. "I always wanted to be better than the boys."

Born in New York's Bronx borough in the 1970s, breakdancing has become a phenomenon around the world and a staple of urban youth culture, performed everywhere from the slums of Mumbai to the streets of Cape Town. The dance is set to make its Olympic debut at

the Paris 2024 Games and Rodrigues hopes such recognition would "legitimize it in the eyes of parents" and encourage more Indian youths to try the sport. Although there are no verified figures on the number of male and female breakers in India, Rodrigues estimates that the competitive community today includes some 800 men—and just 40 women.

Breaking stereotypes

Rodrigues was a schoolgirl in the southern city of Bangalore when she encountered the world of breaking, taking a breather from studying for exams to watch a hip-hop dance performance. It was love at first sight. "It was amazing to watch them move with such a sense of freedom," she recalls. Learning the moves felt like a natural next step. "It felt so exhilarating to work with my body, to see what was possible," she says, breaking into a smile.

A year later, after training with her boyfriend who is also a b-boy (a term for a male breakdancer), she performed in public for the first time. Half a decade on, she says breaking has transformed her sense of self and raised her confidence as a woman living in conservative India. "I used to feel so worried for my safety, so nervous travelling on my own or being stared at, but now I feel totally comfortable dancing in a park or on the street," she says. "People's reac-



In this photo breakdancer Johanna Rodrigues reacts during an interview in Bangalore.

tions don't bother me."

Although Rodrigues has studied contemporary dance and ballet, today she mainly draws on the skills she has picked up learning yoga, the ancient indigenous martial art of Kalaripayattu, and Bharatnatyam—a dance form that originated in southern India's temples over 2,000 years ago. "All these elements are part of who I am... it's such an advantage as an Indian to be able to tap them and use them to create my own version as a b-girl," she says. Keen to boost female participation in the predominantly male sport, she organizes summer dance camps for children through her studio Break Brahma.

"I love teaching girls because they are so uninhibited at that age," she says.

"Breaking isn't just about strength, whatever some guys might think... it's also about flexibility and patience. "Being a b-girl is my way of redefining femininity, by combining masculine and feminine elements which are part of all of us." And, because the sport is intrinsically a freestyle form where dancers improvise to the music, Rodrigues says aspiring breakers who can't afford classes can get tips from social media such as YouTube videos. "Breaking is innately cool and accessible," she says. "You don't need fancy gear, you don't even need shoes, you can do it anywhere." — AFP



Vienna orchestra celebrates 50th birthday with new woman chief

When Vienna's ORF Radio Symphony Orchestra marks its 50th anniversary with a special concert on Wednesday, it will be under the baton of its new chief conductor who, for the first time in Austria, is a woman. Top-tier orchestras in Vienna—arguably the world capital of classical music—are traditionally a predominantly male preserve. But industry observers see the arrival in September of US conductor Marin Alsop at the helm of the ensemble as a sign that even deeply conservative Vienna is beginning to change with the times.

The 63-year-old American—who has previously been chief conductor of orchestras in Bournemouth in Britain, Baltimore in the United States and Sao Paulo in Brazil—said her reception in the Austrian capital has been "very

warm". "I haven't felt this kind of welcome in a long time," she told AFP after a recent rehearsal. Globally, only four percent of conductors are women and the situation is no different in Vienna.

The city's world-famous Vienna Philharmonic, whose New Year concert is broadcast to more than 90 countries across the globe, started admitting women only in 1997. And men still vastly outnumber women on the podium of that orchestra's home, the legendary Musikverein concert hall. More than half of Vienna's music students are female, but they are still a relatively rare sight in conducting classes.

In the rarefied world of conducting, sexist stereotypes—that women lack the necessary strength and authority to lead an orchestra—are deep-seated. In 2017, the renowned Latvian maestro Mariss Jansons caused a storm when he said in a newspaper interview that seeing a woman on the podium was not "my cup of tea", a remark he quickly apologized for. Alsop said that at the outset of her career concert promoters tended to hire her because they mistakenly thought her name was that of a man.

But that was not the case for the ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra. "When Marin was suggested to me, I was electrified," the orchestra's director Christoph Becher said at a recent symposium on gender equality organized by Vienna's University of Music and Performing Arts. "I proposed her name to my musicians and they were enthusiastic," he said.

Patricio Canete-Schreger, head of music at the city council's culture department, is convinced that Alsop's presence will help speed up change in the sector. He noted that the music university has just appointed a woman as its head for the first time in its 200-year history and has also introduced diversity targets for its conducting program. "These are all excellent signs," Canete-Schreger said. For the students, however, gender is not an issue. "Whether you're a man or a woman, the technique in leading us doesn't change," said one young trombonist, 22-year-old Tobias Grabher. — AFP



New Chief Conductor of the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra (RSO) Marin Alsop leads the musicians during a public rehearsal in the Great Broadcasting Room of the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF) in Vienna. — AFP photos

