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'CIRQUE' SHOW FEATURES YOUTUBE SENSATION

An acclaimed street dancer and popper who gained international attention after his *So You Think You Can Dance* audition in 2008, will perform at the Hard Rock Live.

BY JULIE LANDRY LAVIOLETTE



You may be one of the 26 million people who saw Robert Muraine's *So You Think You Can Dance* audition on YouTube, making it one of the site's most-watched videos in the world in 2008.

Muraine, a Los Angeles native, is a popper, a stop-action street dancer with contortionist moves that often prompt the question: How does he do that? He gets that a lot.

Muraine will bring his back-bending, tending-stretching street cred to the theater stage in *Cirque Dreams Illumination*, performed by Pompano Beach-based Cirque Dreams beginning March 10 at the Hard Rock Live near Hollywood.

Cirque Dreams shares a European-style circus sensibility with Montreal-based Cirque du Soleil, but are not affiliated.

Cirque Dreams Illumination includes a cast of 30 acrobats, contortionists and dancers who bring the mundane of a gritty urban setting to extraordinary life, said Cirque Dreams creator Neil Goldberg.

"It is a cast with a broad range of skills from vaudeville to physical comedy to so many disciplines of dance, from ballroom to ballet," Goldberg said. "There is something in the show for everyone."

For Muraine, 22, it's a world away from living off the cash collected in buckets as a street performer. "The only thing that is the same is that it is in front of an audience," he said.

Performing on the streets is mostly a solo gig, Muraine said, while a theater company sparks interactions with other types of dancers.

"Like the four Mongolian contortionists," Muraine laughed. "But I'm learning about balancing, contortions, juggling. It's totally adding to what I'm doing, and definitely changing what I do."

Muraine discovered the incredible flexible nature of his body as a kid in physical education class, stretching before sports.

"I felt I could bend further than anyone," he said. Strong in geometry, Muraine says he can visualize the planes and angles his body needs to form for various popping techniques. By his teens, Muraine was street dancing, performing at high school talent shows and continuing to perfect his style.

At age 20, he auditioned for *So You Think You Can Dance*. Show judge and executive producer Nigel Lythgoe proclaimed Muraine his "favorite dancer of 2008."

Goldberg was watching that night. "When I saw him on the show, I set out to create a character based on him," he said. "I called my casting department and said 'Find this kid and keep track of him.' *Cirque Dreams Illumination* was in development. I was trying to find people who could not only play the role, but bring something extraordinary."

Meanwhile, Muraine's career took off. After his *So You Think You Can Dance* audition aired, the video soared to No. 1 on YouTube. The next day, Muraine appeared on *The Ellen Show* with Ellen DeGeneres. Hundreds of offers poured in to perform.

He appeared on *Superstars of Dance* on NBC and danced through commercials for Ikea, Blackberry and Pringles.

Muraine dropped out of the dance reality show during the contestant selection phase, because he didn't feel comfortable with the choreography. "I would rather quit than be fired," he said.

Being cast in the Cirque touring show means a little tweaking of his free-form ways, Muraine said. "Most pop is just freestyle, you just play a song and go with it," he said.

Goldberg, who founded Cirque Dreams in 1993 and has done 15 shows with the company, said he recognizes the need for creative freedom in performers like Muraine.

"When you find an artist used to performing without boundaries, you don't want to set boundaries. It's a collaboration," Goldberg said.

Muraine said there was a "little learning curve, trying to do the same things each night, but he got used to the idea."

Goldberg was equally as accommodating.

"Now we have versions No. 1 through No. 8, any one of which is acceptable," Goldberg said, smiling. "When I see version No. 9, that's when I start to get nervous."