

Derek Hough, America's Ballroom Ambassador, Hits the Road

A judge on “Dancing with the Stars,” Hough has become one of the country’s most visible dancers. Now his “Symphony of Dance” is touring to 60 cities.

By Brian Schaefer

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In one week this fall, Derek Hough visited five states as part of his 60-city concert tour “Symphony of Dance.” After a show in Cincinnati, and a post-show ice bath, he flew to Los Angeles for 48 hours to appear on Jennifer Hudson’s talk show, rehearse an upcoming Disney holiday special and film an episode of “Dancing With the Stars,” the hit television ballroom and Latin dance competition that helped start his career 16 years ago. Then he flew to Michigan for the next show.

“I guess I’m just a glutton for punishment,” Hough said with a laugh during a video interview from Minneapolis. “I love the real-time interaction with audiences, where they see you on TV and then the next day, you’re in front of them live.”

Since his 2007 debut on “Stars” as a “pro” — a professional dance partner to an eclectic roster of celebrities with varying degrees of dance talent — audiences have had ample opportunity to see Hough on both screen and stage. In addition to “Stars,” he appeared in Radio City Music Hall’s Spring Spectacular; on TV shows like “Nashville,” “High School Musical” and “Hairspray Live!”; and as a judge on Jennifer Lopez’s dance competition “World of Dance.”

That exposure has made Hough, 38, one of the country’s most visible dancers, and the rare performer who could headline a nationwide dance-centric tour that has sold out shows on both coasts and in the Midwest. “Symphony of Dance,” which began in October in Hough’s hometown, Salt Lake City, arrives at the Beacon Theater in New York on Nov. 27.



“I grew up covered in rhinestones”: Hough performing in “Symphony of Dance” at the Stifel Theater in St. Louis. Bryan Birks for The New York Times

“He reminds me of Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire, the triple threats,” the veteran choreographer Bruno Tonioli, a “Stars” judge, said, referring to dancers who sing and act as well. “What he does always has that universal appeal.”

Hough’s popularity reflects the unlikely and enduring success of “Stars,” now in its 32nd season. Part of the show’s allure is its approachability.

“Ballroom is one of the most accessible and relatable forms of dance for mass audiences,” said Conrad Green, an executive producer who is now the showrunner for “Stars.”

There was little mainstream representation of ballroom dance when Hough was a bullied child growing up outside Salt Lake City with four sisters. He knew nothing of Kelly and Astaire but adored Michael Jackson. But there was a family connection to ballroom: His parents met on a college ballroom dance team.

Hough’s mother enrolled him in dance classes “to keep me busy,” he said, which he resisted until he realized it meant he got to be with girls. And he soon became intrigued by ballroom’s ethos of partnership.

“There was something about the working together part that was really cool,” he said. “There was this interaction that’s deeper than just learning a routine by yourself.”

Ballroom competitions also allowed him to travel, so dance became “this vehicle to explore,” he said. At first, that just meant Utah and neighboring states. That changed when he was 12.

Derek and his sister Julianne had caught the attention of the internationally renowned ballroom champions Shirley and Corky Ballas, who frequently visited the dance studio where the siblings trained. When the Houghs' parents split and home became a tumultuous place, the Ballases invited Derek and Julianne to live and train with them in London.

"I was just fascinated by this gift that this boy had," said Shirley Ballas, now a judge on the British show "Strictly Come Dancing." But she also recognized what was lacking. "He just needed to learn discipline and the art of how to put it all together," she said.



Hough and company performing in St. Louis. The show, rooted in ballroom and Latin dance, also includes tap, hip-hop and contemporary works. Bryan Birks for The New York Times



The St. Louis show, left and right. Bryan Birks for The New York Times

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In England, Hough trained in many styles of dance as well as acting and singing. But it was the competitive ballroom dance scene that really grabbed him. “I became obsessed,” he said, and spent hours a day isolating his torso and hips, extending a leg, or articulating a foot.” He fixated on competitions. He recalled thinking: “‘How do I win? How do I get better?’” He won a lot.

Hough stayed in London for a decade pursuing opportunities, which included starring in “Footloose” on the West End in 2006. Back in the United States, Julianne had entered the world of “Stars” and recruited him as a backup dancer on a live tour, which led to a guest appearance on the show, then an offer to join as a pro. He declined.

“In the ballroom community, we at first kind of snubbed it,” he said of “Stars.” “We were like, ‘This isn’t a good representation of our world.’” But after watching his sister thrive on the show, he decided to give it a shot, appreciating its reach.

When Hough arrived, in the fifth season, it was clear to Green that he was particularly well suited to the show. “You have to be a charismatic performer, choreograph well and teach well,” Green said. “It helps if you have knowledge beyond ballroom and Latin dance. On all of those metrics, Derek was really good.”

Hough is a six-time “Stars” champion and three-time Emmy winner for his “Stars” choreography. Since 2020 he has been a judge on the show. As a pro, he was especially lauded as a supportive and savvy instructor.

“He helped me discover what I could do,” said Amy Purdy, a Paralympic athlete who competed with Hough on Season 18. “We would build on my strengths,” said Purdy, who has prosthetic feet, “and he would build a beautiful dance around the things I could do.”

As the Hough siblings’ profiles grew, Derek pitched an independent tour to producers — “a rock concert for dance.” He was rejected. And rejected again. But the Houghs eventually found support and cobbled together a show whose popularity became their proof of concept. From 2014 to 2017, they headlined three national tours.



“In the world where I grew up, everything was competition,” he said. Now his goal is to “bring everybody into the mix. Like, ‘I want to learn from you.’” Bryan Birks for The New York Times

“Symphony of Dance” is Hough’s second tour without his sister. (His first, in 2019, became a Las Vegas residency in 2021 and 2022.) It’s also his first self-funded tour and the first to co-star his new wife, Hayley Hough, who has danced with him for nearly a decade, appears regularly on “Stars” and competed on “So You Think You Can Dance.”

The 90-minute revue, which features a live band and six ensemble dancers, is rooted in ballroom and Latin dance but also includes tap, hip-hop and contemporary works. Music is Hough’s starting point (he used to be in a band), and he likened the development of the show to “creating an album.” The show’s soundtrack, some of which he sings, features a broad spectrum from pop and rock to jazz standards with bespoke orchestrations.

Whereas in previous shows, Hough says he leaned on more commercial music, he called “Symphony,” “a much more theatrical show” that “allows space for the dancing to speak for itself.”

Hough credits “Stars” with creating a production template and knowledgeable audience for his shows. He also readily admits to emulating its flashy aesthetic, which is reflective of ballroom dance culture, if not always a part of it he embraced.

“I grew up covered in rhinestones,” he said, but turned away from the sparkle as his career progressed. Now, with “Symphony,” he’s embracing those roots, bedazzling his set and costumes. “I missed all the shiny stuff,” he said.

In addition to Hough’s choreography, “Symphony” includes contributions from 10 other dance makers. “They create things that I would never even think about, or do movements that aren’t in my vocabulary,” Hough said.

If the element of partnership attracted Hough to ballroom dance in the first place, the group effort of this tour also reflects a further evolution in his approach.

“In the world where I grew up, everything was competition,” he said. “We were always like, ‘I am against you, I’m here to beat you.’ It was a very selfish world.” Now, he said, his goal is to “bring everybody into the mix. Like, ‘I want to learn from you.’”

Entertaining an audience, whether live or onscreen, remains his motivating force. He pointed to a period of burnout in his professional life when “I didn’t want it anymore.”

But then he began to see his “crazy schedule” of TV and touring as an artistic offering, rather than a burden. “All of a sudden,” he said, “that empty tank just went to full.”

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