



The next section was dedicated to the Amazon region, home to the world's largest rainforest. Producers recreated the "birth of life" with a three-dimensional projection of micro-organisms that moved frenetically and divided among themselves. Microbes, represented by large kinetic sculptures, fluttered across the stage. Then a giant forest filled the center of the stadium.

Two indigenous groups, interpreted by Parintins Festival dancers, emerged from the converged shadow of yellow butterflies. The groups recreated patterns of their art, performing their native dances while holding elastic bands that formed giant huts, known as ocas.

The audience remained captivated as acrobats simulating the movements of ships in a storm took over the scene. The performers represented three mechanical Caravels arriving in Brazil after crossing uncharted waters. Upon reaching the center of the stage they were surrounded by indigenous tribes, their movement having left a visible trail on the landscape.

Slavery endured for almost four centuries in Brazil and their story was not forgotten here. Wheels and sticks symbolized plows as artists portrayed shackled slaves at work. The projected forest gave way to designs of sugarcane plantations, showing how industrial development has shaped Brazil's terrain.

There was also a nod to the country's arabic and oriental descendants, with groups of dancers performing a choreography that paid tribute to their culture and arduous journeys from afar.

Contemporary Brazil became the central theme when a majestic city skyline emerged, depicting dense Brazilian metropolises such as Sao Paulo, the largest city in South America and the biggest in the southern hemisphere. Three parkour groups jumped acrobatically from the tops of one building to another, showing Brazil's capacity to overcome chasms. Accompanied by a version of Chico Buarque's song "Construction", a cluster of boxes took the form of a giant wall.

The wall disappeared into darkness and the 14-bis aeroplane, invented and first flown by Brazilian aviator Santos Dumont - came into view. An actor portraying Dumont, flew over Rio to the tune of Tom Jobim's Samba de Aviao.

No celebration of Rio culture could be complete without an acknowledgement of bossa nova, the sensual, soothing music that was born in the seaside city in the 1950s and became acclaimed around the world in the 1960s. It was only fitting that bossa nova's most famous hit, the Girl from Ipanema, was performed by Daniel Jobim, the grandson of the song's composer Tom Jobim, whose image was projected on the stage.

Meanwhile supermodel Gisele Bundchen sauntered towards the image, leaving a winding trail resembling the curves that characterized Niemeyer's architecture.

Rio de Janeiro is a city of more than 1,000 favelas - communities where much of the country's rhythms and dances originate. Funk artist Ludmilla delighted the audience with her rendition of "Rap da Felicidade", an anthem in Rio's favelas, while a boy danced.

Elza Soares then performed Canto de Ossanha, a song which played a major role in helping Afro-Brazilian music break into the mainstream. The segment was completed by Zeca Pagodinho and Marcelo D2, contemporary Rio artists that have created their own styles by fusing samba, pop, pagode and hip hop.

Credited with empowering black women, Brazilian rappers Karol Conka and MC Sofia sung while a dancer performed a combination of break dance with capoeira. MC Sofia, who is only 12 years old, showed all the makings of a global pop star with her confident and compelling on-stage presence. "Look and listen to this black girl. Focus only on the empowerment, respect our fight and our movement," she sang.

The stage was then swamped by Maracutu and Bate Bola dancers. In a warning about the danger of intolerance, a battle broke out between the two groups that convulsed the stadium. The energy and tension of the artists portrayed disputes throughout Brazil and the world that are yet to be resolved.

Actress Regina Case brought the crowd to its feet by dancing to Pais Tropical while Jorge Ben Jor played the guitar. Their performance was followed by choreographies from a typical Madureira Baile Charme, or soul ball, featuring some 1,500 dancers. The upbeat segment ended with a short fireworks display.

The next part of the ceremony was a reminder of the fraught impact of climate change. Screens with Nasa-type data showed the spread of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, climbing temperatures, melting ice caps and rising sea levels. Meanwhile a boy tried to find a way out of maze of buildings in a dry, treeless landscape.

The sombre scenes were followed by a message of hope as the boy spotted a plant emerge from the arid ground. Carlos Drummond de Andrade's poem, A Flor e a Nausea, was read by Fernando Montenegro and Judi Dench, its verses providing hope the planet can be saved. "Stop business," the poem said. "A flower has sprouted in the street." Meanwhile screens showed the benefits of planting new trees and told us that Brazil has reduced deforestation in the Amazon by 80% since 2005.

In an Olympics first, athletes participated in the opening ceremony's creative program by receiving a seed and a cartridge with soil. The 11,000 seeds will be planted in Radical Park at Rio's Deodoro Olympic site, forming the Athletes' Forest. There will be 207 species of Brazilian trees with a different one for each Olympic nation.

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