

It's the opening night of the inaugural Tromsø World Festival in northern Norway, the gateway to the Arctic Circle. The air is crisp enough to see your breath. There is snow on the mountains flanking the harbour and, in a serendipitous display, the night sky is strafed with silver and green.

The festival's main venue, the Studentsamfunnet Driv, is heaving, steamy. The coat racks are groaning under layers of puffer jackets and fake fur. A cheer goes up when festival CEO Vasil Gjurroski strides onstage to begin proceedings; the colourful ex-Yugoslavian is a popular figure in small town Tromsø, and his vision for a global music celebration – enabled in collaboration with Oslo World's new five-city-wide Movement Network – has finally, fabulously, come true.

The act that christens Tromsø World isn't from Norway, although she has just played Oslo World two years in a row. The compact green-haired woman who bursts into view – jumping, high-kicking, singing up a frenzy – is from Angola, and she's a rising superstar. Get used to her name: Pongo.

"Tromsøøø," she trills, flanked by a drummer, a DJ and two female dancers wearing shorts as short as her own. She launches into her irrepressible 2018 hit 'Tambulaya', a song that tells of dance floor encounters and joyful distractions that took place during and in spite of Angola's civil war, her thin, strong voice soaring over a high-octane crossover of electronic beats and styles, including hip-hop, Afrofunk and the rhythms of Portuguese-speaking Africa.

'Dance, dance, dance,' sings Pongo in a mix of Portuguese and Kimbundu, her first language. 'Lift the skirt, break the rules, let loose.'

'Tambulaya' means 'to give and to take' in Kimbundu, a notion that suits her big-hearted sound and its grab-bag of genres. The song's video sees her decked out in fatigues and a military beret, delivering her message through a megaphone, inviting listeners onto a dancefloor that brings healing, release and collective might. The same joyful, personal-is-political aesthetic pervades her 2022 debut album *Sakidila* (Thank You) – which includes the bangers 'Wegue Wegue' and 'Bruxos', and the lush, softer love song 'Doudou' – and her entire life. "A lot of the expression



Pongo christens Tromsø World Festival in 2022

in my work comes from my childhood memories," says Lisbon-based Pongo, 31, who left strife-torn Angola at the age of eight. "I have faced many problems and all these things have made me stronger. I fought very hard for my freedom, for my rights as a Black woman, a woman and a human, and I am winning."

Pongo's verve, like her music, is powerful, infectious. After twerking alongside her dancers, she plunges into the Tromsø crowd, encouraging them to dance around her, in a way that resembles the *dança de roda* (circle dance) of *semba* music, that off-the-beat predecessor to Angolan styles including *kizomba* and *kuduro*. For a moment the diva is out of sight, surrounded by a whirl of dancing bodies. Then, just as suddenly, she's back onstage. Rapping, singing, karate kicking the air.

"We did these circle dances at family parties and ceremonial events when I was growing up," she says. "I like to have these moments in my shows to share the energy. I need to get the audience involved."

It's been some journey for the woman born Engracia Domingos da Silva in Luanda, Angola, to an ex-street dancer turned construction worker and a mother who worked as a maid. "My earliest memories are musical," says Pongo, the eldest of five daughters.

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"I remember dancing to *semba*, and *soukous* from Congo, and loving the music of [Angolan singer/composer] David Zé. I remember being five or six and being taken to see [Angolan folk and *semba* legend] Bonga in concert, wanting to be up there on the stage, dancing with his crew. I don't remember much about the war," she adds, referencing the decades-long Angolan conflict that flared again in the late 90s, "just that we had to leave."

After a year in Rome – in a space so cramped she shared a bed with her sisters – the family were relocated to the outskirts of Lisbon. Racism was rife: "You didn't see many African people in Portugal then. At school I wanted to share my culture, but there was so much discrimination. I was taunted by the other kids, even by teachers. It happened on the street, buses, everywhere."

Homelife, too, was fraught. When her father's authoritarianism became unbearable, 12-year-old Pongo threw herself from their seventh-floor apartment window, sustaining near-fatal injuries. "I am not ready to talk about my father and his behaviour ▶