

[Contra Costa Times, June 17, 2010](#)

Preview Dance

Bomba artists dance to different drummers

By Jennifer Modenessi – jmodenessi@bayareanewsgroup.com

Norka Nadal, who hails from one of Puerto Rico's most respected bomba families, lives in New York where bomba groups are plentiful and the percussion-driven Caribbean music and dance from is part of daily life.

But the musician and teacher doesn't quite like Las Bomberas de la Bahia, the Bay Area-based ensemble with which Nadal makes a guest appearance June 26-27, the final weekend of the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival.

"Traditionally, women in bomba do not play (the drums)," Nadal says, referring to the barrel-like subidor and buleador drums that serve as the beating heart of the Puerto Rican musical style.

Beat of the drum

Along with maracas, or gourd shakers, and cuas, or stick-like percussive instruments, the drums are just one facet of a bomba gathering, or performance that includes singing and spontaneous dancing and takes place anywhere from a living room to a theater. But the fact that Las Bomberas are an all-female ensemble – the one one in the Bay Area – isn't the only reason Nadal mentored the group and became a fan. Since forming in 2007, Las Bomberas have dedicated themselves to learning all they can about bomba (the word refers to the drums) while keeping its rhythms alive and adding their distinct voices to the tradition.

"It kind of happened by accident," Sarazeta Ragazzi says about her introduction to bomba. Ragazzi, 33, and drummer Denise Solis, 31, codirect the eight or nine regular members of the group, including singers/dancers/musicians Vanessa Camarena Arredondo, Iliia Correa, Melissa Reyes and Vanessa Zevallos.

"The first time I walked in and took (a bomba class), it was so familiar (it felt like) I'd already been doing it," says Ragazzi, a San Francisco resident. An avid performer who has studied various styles of ethnic dance, Ragazzi was recovering from an injury when she stepped into Maria Elena Garcia's bomba class at San Francisco's Dance Mission Theater. Dancer and teacher bonded instantly, and Ragazzi became "obsessed" with bomba.

The rhythm gets you

For Solis, a cultural events organizer who grew up surrounded by music, the passion began while watching a performance in Los Pleneros de la 21, an acclaimed New York based ensemble. She was instantly drawn to bomba's propulsive rhythms, which form the foundation of songs sung in a call-and-response style. "It wasn't so much just the drums, but the conversation between the dancer and the drummer" that really got her hooked, Solis says.

Her delight in that playful and dynamic interplay was evident during a recent rehearsal and San Francisco's club Puertorriqueño. As Solis' palms rained down on her subidor, or lead drum, she watched the dancers for piquetes – movements made with the shoulders, chest, hips, feet and articles of clothing such as skirts, handkerchiefs or scarves. A shake of the hips produced a boom. Rapid flicks and swishes of Ragazzi's voluminous yellow skirt inspired rapid staccato beats: Boom! Boom! Boom! The friendly challenge of timing and skill – the dancer leads and the drummer answers the dancer's movements as closely as she can – lasts anywhere from a few seconds to minutes.

It's electrifying.

But bomba is about much more than showmanship. It was created as a form of resistance music, Solis says, adding that some educators and historians have traced its roots to African slaves brought into Puerto Rico to work the dense sugar cane fields. Because bomba was forbidden until very recent times, much of what is known about it has been passed down through oral tradition, scholarship and the wisdom of elders and practicing bomberos in the United States and Puerto Rico.

Reflecting diversity

From their teachers, Las Bomberas have learned bomba's traditional rhythmic patterns, such as the cuembé, corvé, holandé and seis corridor, which the group will showcase in their EDF performances. They arrange traditional songs such as "Los Varilleros," a composition that tells of the hardship and struggle of Puerto Rican sugar plantation workers, and compose rousing original songs, such as "Ponderosa," a joyful ode to female power written by Bombera Vanessa Zevallos.

To reflect the diversity of the ensemble, which includes members of Puerto Rican, Mexican, Peruvian, Salvadorian and Cuban heritage; Las Bomberas take songs from their traditions, such as the Mexican son jarocho, a string-based musical style, and adapt them to bomba. They make clear that their interpretation is firmly contemporary.

"There's a balance where we try to be as respectful to the tradition as we can, based on how we've learned it, but also making it relevant for who we are today," Solis says. "I think it's important to retain the essence of (bomba) – of resistance, of honoring ancestors and history, and honoring a painful past that continues to be painful today, because of the reality of where the world still is."

SF Ethnic Dance Festival

When: 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays through June 27; Las Bomberas de la Bahia will be the last group to perform on June 26 and 27.

Where: Palace of Fine Arts Theatre, 3301 Lyon St. S.F.

Tickets: \$22-\$44

Contact: 415-392-4400; www.worldartswest.org, www.cityboxoffice.com, www.tickets.com

Online: See a video of the group on this paper's website.

Festival highlights

Here are a few upcoming performances you shouldn't miss:

Melissa Cruz:

This Bay Area dancer will interpret marinete, one of the oldest forms of Spanish flamenco. Accompanied by palmetas, or hand claps, foot-stamping and the passionate voice of a singer, Cruz will place a feminine slant on a traditionally masculine style. She performs Saturday and Sunday.

Sri Susilowati:

Susilowati will perform jaipongan, a Sundanese dance form that mixes folk dance and martial arts. Watch for both athletic and sensual movements set to percussion and live vocals. Saturday and Sunday.

Tonatiuh:

Named after the Aztec god of the sun, this Salinas based ensemble will perform a narrative dance from coastal Mexico addressing the blending of Catholicism and indigenous beliefs and rituals. June 23-24.

The Chinyakere Ensemble:

Two dances reflecting the art, culture and spirituality of Zimbabwe's Shona and Ndebele tribes are the focus of the ensemble's set. June 23-24.

Ballet Afsaneh:

This celebration of Afghan culture spotlights dances, performed by women, not traditionally seen on stage in that country. Look for ornate costumes and a multitude of Eurasian influences due to Afghanistan's geographic situation as a crossroads for many cultures. June 23-24.