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New digs for diverse dance festival

After three decades, even die-hard dance fans sometimes take the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival for granted. Every year its gloriously polyglot programming reveals the Bay Area's dizzying diversity to itself, presenting far-flung ethnic dance traditions by local companies that often include dancers not born in those cultures.

The bountiful display, unlike any other dance festival in the United States, is one reason for the Bay Area's reputation as a dance mecca. Reviewing last year's smorgasbord, the New York Times wrote enviously, "Here is one the finest of all American dreams: a settling where cultures can celebrate their own traditions while honoring and applauding others."

The sense of complacency can creep in when people feel that skipping a season or two is no big deal, as the festival will be back again in 12 months. But this year the EDF has received a radical makeover, with new venues, new programs that invite audience participation and an expanded calendar that adds a fifth weekend of dance.

The EDF's 33rd season opens at noon June 3 at San Francisco City Hall with a tribal dance ceremony honoring the Rumsen Ohlone tribe and the presentation of the annual Malonga Casquelourd Lifetime Achievement Award to tribal chief Tony Cerda. Featuring some of 50 companies encompassing 750 dancers, the EDF continues through July 3rd at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall, which marks the festival's first East Bay foray. Evicted from its longtime Palace of Fine Arts perch by construction, the EDF has taken advantage of the opportunities afforded by new digs, but not without some serious stage jitters.

"After 25 years in the same location, there was a lot of trepidation about moving," says Julie Mushet, executive director of World Arts West, the organization that produces the EDF. "As we got into it, the excitement of the new venues has been exhilarating. It's a very magical season, but it's frightening financially in these times. After 25 years people are used to how the setup worked at PFA, but we're able to do things now we've only dreamed about doing."

The first full weekend program runs June 11-12 at Zellerbach, a venue that provides the companies with world-class stage craft. It's a typically encompassing program, including Richmond's Gadung Kasturi Balinese Dance and Music, Theatre Flamenco of San Francisco, San Jose Taiko and Parangal Dance Company.

"We try as much as we can to make sure that each evening has a cultural balance representing Africa, Europe, Asia, the whole world," says Ghanaian-born EDF co-artistic director and UC Berkeley music professor CK Ladzepko, the drummer and choreographer who pioneered the teaching of West African dance in the United States.

The most intriguing event is the California Native Big Time Gathering at Yerba Buena Gardens on June 18. It is the first official Ohlone conclave in two centuries, since the California mission system scattered and decimated the tribes. The daylong celebration introduces the EDF's new participatory model, with performances, rituals, ceremonies and craft presentations hosted by the Rumsen Ohlone. As the only venue with access to the ground, the Yerba Buena Gardens was the obvious space for the event. In a jolt of synchronicity, the EDF discovered that the Yerba Buena Center was built on Native burial grounds and that bones were disinterred during construction.

“There really hasn't been any healing about those graves since they were dug up,” Mushet says. “This festival has been good at honoring dance as sacred practice, but this ceremony has been sustained against all odds. The Ohlone tribes are carrying the traditions with very little support, and it's really important cultural heritage, our cultural heritage.”

Walnut Creek's Te Mana O Te Ra, a company dedicated to Tahitian dance, has participated in the EDF about a dozen times since the 1980s. Run by Lisa and Rey Aguilar, the company performs June 26 at the YBCA Novellus Theater on a program that includes Chuna McIntyre of the Nunamta Yup'ik Eskimo Singers and Dancers, Los Lupeños de San Jose, Nimely Pan African Dance Company, Murphy Irish Dance Company, and Natyalay, a company that focuses on South Indian classical dance.

For Lisa Aguilar, a Filipina who has devoted her life to study of Polynesian dance and culture, the EDF has opened international doors, leading to tours in Spain and the United Kingdom. Premiering new works at the EDF provides motivation and focus to continue her research collecting folkloric traditions that might otherwise fade away.

“Hawaiian dance is much more documented,” Aguilar says. “In Tahiti to this day, it's an oral tradition. I go back every year, and the elders are very open to sharing. They won't write it down, because they feel it would lose the true meaning. I'm Filipino by heritage, but it's a culture and genre I love with a passion. People see the lightly clad girls, the drums and shaking hips, but there is so much more to it. The Ethnic Dance Festival has been a real forum for me to try to educate and teach people about the genre.”

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