

San Francisco Chronicle

Performance

Ethnic Dance Festival — dance like you've never seen it

By Allan Ulrich

June 3, 2015



Tommy Nguyen of Jikelele Dance Theater, a company which makes its debut this year at the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival. Photo by RJ Muna.

The menu for the annual San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival is the most reliable indicator of population shifts in the Bay Area. Every year, a handful of companies make their performing

debuts in the project, allowing us a glimpse into a culture we may have previously considered alien, if we considered it at all. They become part of us.

The 37th edition of the festival, which gets under way this week, will offer introductions to companies that specialize in social dances of the ragtime era, Indian Bollywood, flamenco and Jewish Ladino culture. Also, prepare yourself for Jikelele Dance Theater and for a primer on South African black township theater, a meld of movement, singing and acting that may confound some of our preconceptions about dance from the African continent.

Three years ago, Soweto-born Thamsanqa Hlatywayo formed Jikelele (the word translates as “all around”) at Oakland’s Laney College, where he is on the staff. He choreographs his shows and composes the music. Watching six dancers rehearse for the Ethnic Dance Festival appearance in a campus studio on a recent morning afforded its share of revelations. The movement style varies strikingly from the West African vocabulary with which the Bay Area is familiar.



Caption: Tiffany Rabb, a member of Jikelele Dance Theater, a South African company, which makes its debut at the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival June 6-7 at the Palace of Fine Arts Theater. Photo by RJ Muna

West African dance seems rooted in the earth. What I saw at Laney aspired to the air. In their short, tiered skirts, the women leaped at the ceiling, bent their torsos in unison, their arms deployed eloquently, their legs sinking into deep plié, their ankles ringed with bags of seeds that shook whenever they moved. The lone male seemed a bit menacing in his fur leggings and huge feathered hat. But he, too, joined the ensemble, as they ran around the space, vocalizing and clapping rhythmically.

From the sidelines came a command. “Nail that movement,” ordered Hlatywayo.

The choreography derives from the Zulu and Xhosa peoples, although Hlatywayo feels uneasy about assigning an origin for the various dances. He would prefer to call Jikelele a form of black urban dance that arose in the townships during the apartheid era.

“Tribalism did not work for us,” says Hlatywayo, and he praises the late Nelson Mandela for uniting his homeland. “The blacks were not prepared to accept the whites, and the whites were not prepared to embrace the blacks. Without Mandela, South Africa would have been destroyed.” (Jikelele will honor Mandela’s birthday with a full-evening entertainment at the Berkeley Black Repertory Group Theater on July 18.)

Now in his 60s, Hlatywayo is a veteran of international stages. When asked about life in the townships, he recalls his childhood affinity for music and dance, which “kept me going” and led him to a boarding school. In South Africa, he founded a couple of dance companies. He came to this country in 1980, traveling first to Las Vegas, then to Broadway, where he took a principal role in the hit South African musical “Sarafina.” Later, he joined the international tour of the show, teaching master classes all along the route. His “Life in a South African Shanty Town,” mixing traditional material with contemporary political issues, was the Bay Area’s township musical.

Hlatywayo is confident about his future success in the field. “My work appeals to audiences. The style is new, people want to see it.”

Allan Ulrich is The San Francisco Chronicle’s dance correspondent.

If you go

San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival. Weekend One: 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, June 6-7; 4 p.m. Sunday, June 7. Festival continues through June 27. Palace of Fine Arts Theater, 3601 Lyon St., S.F. \$28-\$48. (415) 392-4400. www.cityboxoffice.com.