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Diverse ethnic dance

By Janos Gereben – *Special to The Examiner*

Cultural traditions as different as those of the Congo, Afghanistan, China and Hawaii are featured in 36 dances and 26 world premieres at the 2010 San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival.

The 32nd festival unfolds throughout June in the Palace of Fine Arts, with four weekends of programs presenting 37 Bay Area dance companies and their 600 dancers. Among first-time participants in the festival is Djenane Saint Juste, artistic director of the Afoutayi Dance Company of San Francisco. He is from Haiti, and his dancing career began with participation in that country's widespread voodoo culture.

"I am continuing my family tradition," Saint Juste says, "to keep the voodoo in my life because this tradition is part of my blood, my heart and my soul. My grandmother was a mambo and a queen of Rara in Lagonave, Haiti. She taught my mother all the beauty of the dances, singing, drumming and religious practices – and I learned from my mother, also a mambo and a famous dancer."

Mexico occupies a special place this year, with a festival tribute to the country's bicentennial celebration.

"Over the past three decades of the festival, the Mexican folkloric dance community has been one of the most inspiring to present on stage," says Festival Executive Director Julie Mushet. "To bring dancers together for this year's Mexican Bicentennial Tribute from six outstanding companies is a very special opportunity and thrilling collaboration."

One of those companies is the Ballet Folklórico Mexicano de Carlos Moreno of Oakland, participating in the festival for the fifth time.

Moreno says the company was founded by his father before he was born, and his mother is making the traditional costumes.

"I grew up watching many groups from Mexico perform and traveled throughout Mexico with my father, learning the many regional dances and experiencing life in that beautiful country. Folklórico is my life, my love and I do not know life without it."

From another part of the world comes a very different cultural tradition represented by Fua Dia Congo of Oakland. One of the festival's founding companies, with a dozen appearances over the years, the troupe is directed by Muisi-kongo S. Malonga, who says:

"Traditional Congolese music and dance is the primary vehicle through which I am able to stay actively connected to my cultural heritage, share valuable cultural information with others, and more personally, build upon the works and safeguard the memory of my father, Fua Dia Congo founder Malonga Casquerlourd."

Ishika Seth, a choreographer, instructor and dancer with the Mona Sampath Dance Company of Milpitas, represents modern Indian dance influenced by the Bollywood musical film genre.

“I was born and raised in India where I studied Indian contemporary dance, Mayurbhanj Chhau and yoga,” says Seth, who came to the U.S. to study modern dance. “I discovered Mona Sampath’s style of Bollywood in the Bay Area and found a unique blend of East and West, stemming from a cultural place but evolving into a global and contemporary dance form.”