

San Francisco Chronicle

Ethnic Dance Festival moves to a grand new venue

By Claudia Bauer
June 21, 2017



Antonia Minnecola will perform with Zakir Hussain at the 2017 San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, which runs July 8-16 at the War Memorial Opera House. Photo: Carl Sermon

The San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival is famed internationally, but it is about to make a major hometown debut. For the first time in 39 years, the festival will take place at the War Memorial Opera House, in two programs spanning Saturdays and Sundays, July 8-9 and 15-16.

The Opera House's gilt walls and red velvet seats promise a spectacular setting for dazzling costumes and dance traditions rooted in cultures from Iran to Spain, Congo to Mexico.

"This (festival) is unique in the whole world," says Co-Artistic Director Carlos Carvajal, "in terms of all the cultures that are presented and the excellence of their performance."

Carvajal, 83, and co-director CK Ladzekpo, 73, bring lifelong expertise and enthusiasm to their curation of the festival. Carvajal began dancing in the folk traditions of his Filipino heritage before establishing a career in ballet, and has choreographed for San Francisco's opera and ballet companies. Hailing from a family of renowned Ghanaian musicians and dancers, Ladzekpo is an award-winning artist and a lecturer in UC Berkeley's music department.



San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival Co-Artistic Directors CK Ladzekpo and Carlos Carvajal.
Photo: RJ Muna

The men also share a passion for equal representation. “Throughout the history of ethnic dance, or ethnic music, we always have to fight for inclusion,” says Ladzekpo. “Going to the Opera House is another mountain that our community needs to climb — that we belong there.”

The festival has already mapped a path to greater recognition for ethnic performing arts. “When we started as a fledgling hula school, we mostly performed within our insular communities for Hawaiian cultural events,” says Patrick Makuakane, director of longtime performers Na Lei Hulu I Ka Wekiu. “The festival was the first opportunity that we had to perform for a wider audience.”



Ryan Fuimaono of Na Lei Hulu I Ka Wekiu, featured at the 2017 San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, which runs July 8-16 at the War Memorial Opera House. Photo: RJ Muna

Fellow hula artist Mahealani Uchiyama concurs. “Having an opportunity to be presented at the same level as the ‘mainstream’ forms does give us the inspiration to work hard to get there,” she says. Rather than dancing, she will play the nyunga nyunga in a pan-African musical duet with

Zena Carlota on the kora. “The instruments are typically not played together, but they blend very well,” she says.



Zena Carlota, left, and Mahealani Uchiyama, right, will be featured at the 2017 San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, which runs July 8-16 at the War Memorial Opera House. Photo: RJ Muna

Uchiyama’s observation captures the ethos of the festival. “If you bring cultures together, they come to understand one another through what they do artistically,” says Ladzekpo. “When they leave the festival, we expect them to carry that feeling of togetherness.”

The sense of community extends to the audience as well, particularly in the all-comers hootenanny that follows each performance. At the Opera House, the lobby will become a forum for dancers, musicians, family, friends and audience members to gather in a cross-cultural freestyle.

“It’s almost like a spirituality — there is one rhythm playing and everyone joins together,” says Naomi Diouf, artistic director of Oakland’s Diamano Coura West African Dance Company. Diouf’s troupe won’t perform this year, but she will receive the Malonga Casquelourd Lifetime Achievement Award for her decades of leadership, teaching and artistry.

“She really is exemplary,” says Carvajal. The spotlight-shy Diouf, though, is focused on what the award could mean to others. “It helps African dance artists see what could be for them,” she says. “It’s a sign that their work in the future could be valuable, and they could receive an award for their contribution.”

It won’t be Diouf’s Opera House debut, though — she helped Val Caniparoli choreograph his beloved 1995 work “Lambarena,” a hybrid of West African and ballet, for San Francisco Ballet.

“Her mentoring has altered the way I choreograph to this day,” Caniparoli says via email. “I still refer to her as the queen because she is royalty in my eyes. It’s exciting that the performances are at the Opera House this year — maybe it will draw an audience that has not seen the festival before.”

An invitation was hard to come by — 80 troupes auditioned for 24 slots. Several artists were chosen by a panel and others were curated by Ladzekpo and Carvajal, and the festival commissioned three world premieres: Theatre Flamenco with La Tania, in her farewell performance; an Afro-Cuban collaboration by John Santos Sextet and Alayo Dance Company; and the festival debut of tabla master Zakir Hussain and kathak dancer Antonia Minnecola.

“I have been doing, over the past 20 years, around 140 shows a year all over the world,” says Hussain. But he and Minnecola, who are married, feel as excited as any other first-timers. “Look at the performances that have happened on (the Opera House) stage. Just to be able to touch that and feel that, and become a part of that history, is very important for the festival.”

As always, the directors’ highest priority is the artists. “The most important thing is that the companies glorify the cultures that they represent,” Ladzekpo says. “They should feel good about themselves and tell the world, ‘This is who we are.’”



Aisan Hoss of Ballet Afsaneh, featured at the 2017 San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, which runs July 8-16 at the War Memorial Opera House. Photo: RJ Muna

Claudia Bauer is a Bay Area freelance writer.

39th Annual San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival

8 p.m. Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays, July 8-9 and 15-16. War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave., S.F. \$25-\$45. 415-392-4400. www.sfethnicedancefestival.org.

Weekend One: Academy of Danse Libre, De Rompe y Raja Cultural Association, Fogo Na Roupas Performing Company, John Santos Sextet & Alayo Dance Company, LIKHA Pilipino Folk Ensemble, Nā Lei Hulu I Ka Wēkiu, Awakko Ren, and Zakir Hussain & Antonia Minnecola. Pre-show performances by Vinic-Kay and Leung’s White Crane Lion and Dragon Dance Association.

Weekend Two: Ballet Afsaneh, Ballet Folklórico México Danza, Bitezo Bia Kongo, Gurus of Dance, Māhealani Uchiyama, Natya at Berkeley, Te Mana O Te Ra, Theatre Flamenco & La

Tania, YaoYong Dance, and Zena Carlota. Pre-show performances by Gamelan Sekar Jaya and Zena Carlota.

To see Academy of Danse Libre perform at City Hall: <http://tinyurl.com/l47wmer>

To see Academy of Awakko Ren's festival audition: <http://tinyurl.com/md6vl4u>

To see a Bitezo Bia Kongo perform in Santa Cruz: <http://tinyurl.com/n8xvtx4>

To see YaoYong Dance's award-winning work "The Great Swan Geese":
<http://tinyurl.com/lemylxg>