

# San Francisco Chronicle

## San Francisco's Ethnic Dance Fest celebrates 40 years

By Claudia Bauer  
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Parangal Dance Company's "The Abduction of Princess Lawanen" is inspired by an old Maranao poem.  
Photos: RJ Muna

Anyone who doubts the power of the arts to unite humanity has only to look at the [San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival](#). This season — its 40th — will feature 500 diverse performers representing 17 cultures with origins on five continents, from AguaClara Flamenco (Spanish flamenco) to Ye Feng (Chinese contemporary).

There is much more to celebrate than the festival's remarkable longevity. For not only has it put 475 different dance companies on the stage, it also has elevated international dance to the Bay Area's most exalted venue: the War Memorial Opera House.

"What we have to present from our traditions and our customs really deserve a venue that most people don't associate with them," said Co-Artistic Director Mahealani Uchiyama, on a spring day in her Emeryville studio. "In light of what's going on (politically), this is an example of who we can be, in the sense of being unafraid to express yourself from an ancestral, cultural, spiritual point of view."

A dance ethnologist, and hula and Tahitian artist, Uchiyama is one-third of a triad of new artistic directors that includes Latanya d. Tigner, a dancer and choreographer with Oakland's

Dimensions Dance Theater, and Patrick Makuakane, founder of the Hawaiian dance company Nā Lei Hulu i ka Wēkiu. All longtime festival performers — like most Ethnic Dance Festival artists, the directors are from the Bay Area — they took the reins from Directors Emeritus Carlos Carvajal and CK Ladzekpo in November.

New Artistic Directors Māhealani Uchiyama (left), Patrick Makuakāne and Latanya d. Tigner.

The festival debuted at the Opera House last year, and the experience felt as validating for the audience as for the performers. “A lot of people had never been” there, Tigner said. “It’s, like, ‘OK, we do belong in this space.’ Not just as artists, but our community should have access and feel comfortable going into these places.”

Even the essential amenities had an outsize impact. “When we did the first walk-through last year, our eyes were so huge to see these beautiful dressing rooms with tables and a mirror and lights,” 16-year Executive Director Julie Mushet said by phone. “Every artist has a chair to sit in, which has never happened in 40 years.” Also new was the house wardrobe team, on hand for skillful regalia repairs.



Mushet hopes that the Opera House will be the festival’s permanent home after several years of venue-hopping and resulting financial stress. However, an uncertain future won’t dampen the 40th-anniversary celebration. The directors have some surprises in store, along with nine world premieres and a thoughtfully curated mix of Tahitian, Tabasqueño, Afro-Peruvian and dozens more styles.

While the forms are centuries old, they are also living, evolving arts, and this year’s Lifetime Achievement honorees represent a spectrum of veterans and innovators: groundbreaking choreographer Lily Cai, lighting designer Patty-Ann Farrell, Yup’ik Eskimo artist Chuna McIntyre and the late Jamila Salimpour, a pioneer in belly-dance preservation.

“Lily Cai is fearless,” says Uchiyama of her dazzling dances, like the Izzie Award-winning “Postcards & Beyond” and “Silk Cascade.” Founded in 1988, Cai’s company melds ancient Chinese and modern styles and performs in settings as varied as schools, formal venues and a Grateful Dead concert.

Designer Farrell has lighted almost all of the festival’s 40 seasons. “She used to come with her baby in a basket,” says Mushet. At production meetings, Farrell begins to strategize how to conjure each company’s unique vision, complement their vibrant regalia and engineer

harmonious transitions from one to the next. “It is so difficult to do,” says Mushet, “and she is a true master.”

“Chuna is Papa Earth,” Makuakāne says of McIntyre, who hails from the Alaskan Yup’ik Eskimo culture. His company, Nunamta, will open the festival’s first weekend with a dance not seen in public for 200 years. “The Christian missionaries came to his village and said, ‘You can no longer do that dance,’” Mushet says. McIntyre learned the dance from his grandmother, who had in turn learned it from her elders.



The Nunamta Yup’ik Eskimo Singers and Dancers will open the 40th S.F. Ethnic Dance Festival.

Before she died in December, Salimpour learned that the festival would recognize her profound impact on belly dance, which has struggled to survive amid the growing conservatism of the Middle East. In 1949, she began codifying the style into a technique that thousands of people worldwide have learned in person and online. “She changed the whole field of belly dance,” says Mushet.

Beyond being a feast for the senses, a respectful remembrance and a joyous party, the Ethnic Dance Festival offers an introduction to people we may cross paths with every day but never knew. Even for the directors.

“Seeing the generations, seeing the different cultures really bringing their art forward in such a grand way really excited me,” Tigner says of her first festival, in 1986. “It made me want to look for connections between other groups. Anywhere I go (now), I want to know what the dance is.”

*Claudia Bauer is a freelance writer.*

*More Information*

40th San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival: 8 p.m. Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays, July 14-15 and 21-22. War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave., S.F. \$25-\$45. 415-392-4400.

[www.sfethnicdancefestival.org](http://www.sfethnicdancefestival.org).

Weekend One: AguaClara Flamenco, Arenas Dance Company, Bolivia Corazón de América, Chitresh Das Youth Company, Ensamble Ballet Folklórico de San Francisco, Leung's White Crane Lion & Dragon Dance Association, Nunamta Yup'ik Eskimo Singers and Dancers, Parangal Dance Company, Te Pura O Te Rahura'a, Ye Feng.

Weekend Two: Ananya Tirumala, Antara Asthaayi Dance, Caminos Flamencos, Charya Burt Cambodian Dance, De Rompe y Raja Cultural Association, Los Danzantes de Aztlán de Fresno State, Nimely Pan African Dance Company, OngDance Company.