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Panama-Pacific Expo centennial: Diverse dances to dazzle

By Jesse Hamlin

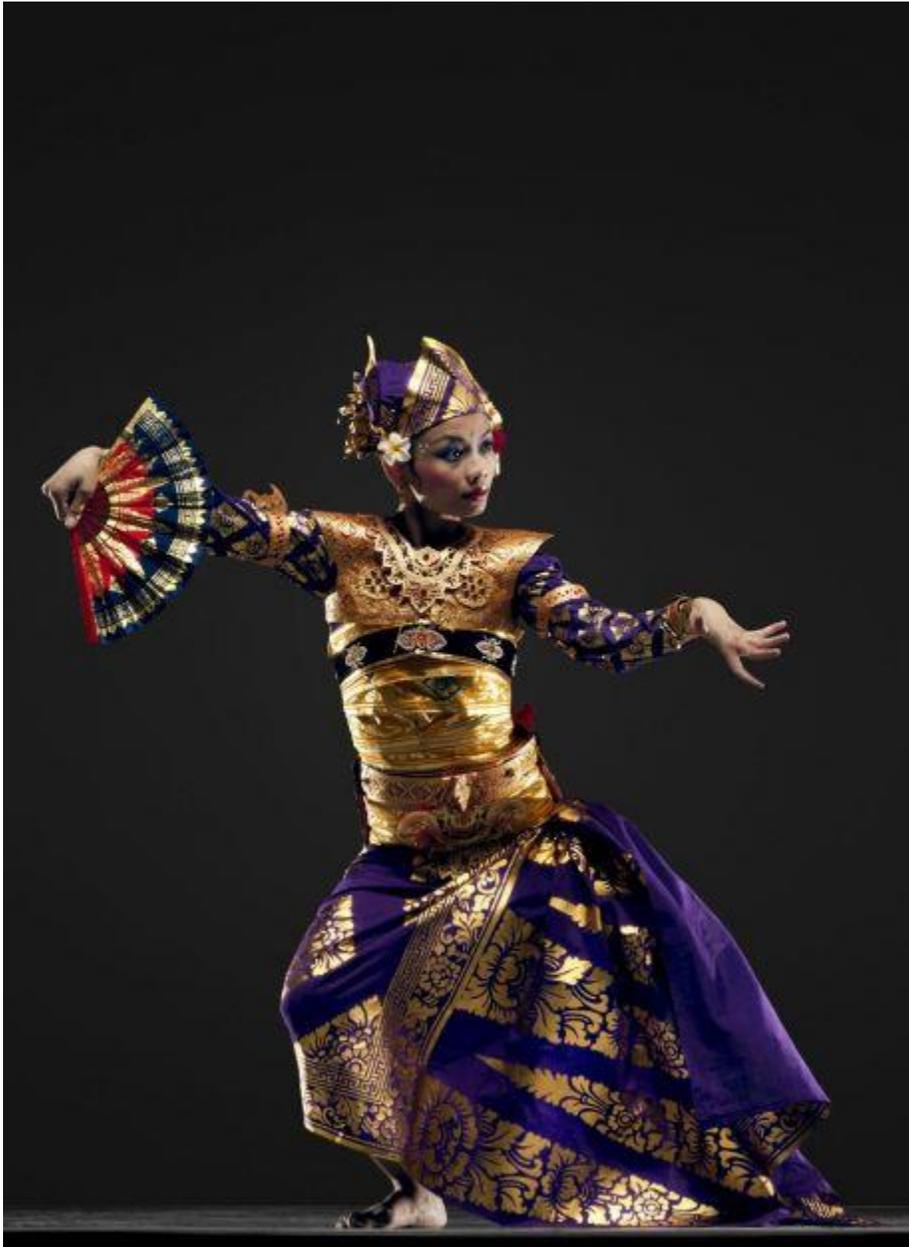


Photo: RJ Muna

Dancers in Gamelan Sekar Jaya, including Nina Herlina, will perform at the City Hall Rotunda on Feb. 20.

Among other things on view in the Swedish Pavilion at San Francisco's fabled 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition were 16 traditional Swedish dolls — 3½ feet tall — exquisitely costumed in the traditional garb worn by dancers from the various regions of the Scandinavian kingdom.

After the exposition, **Phoebe Hearst** bought the big dolls and years later gave them to the UC Berkeley museum that bears her name. That's where **Julie Mushet**, executive director of the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, saw them stored in boxes after learning of their existence from the museum director, **Mari Lyn Salvador**. Dazzled, Mushet thought how cool it would be if Swedish dancers dressed in those beautiful costumes performed at the opening event of the yearlong centennial celebration of the famed 1915 fair, where millions of Americans first saw dancers from Bali, China, Spain and other cultures across the globe.

Working with local Swedish dancer **Brooke Babcock**, Mushet arranged for a top group of traditional Swedish hoofers and musicians — led by **Leif** and **Margareta Virtanen** from Norberg, Sweden — to perform at the free public show in the City Hall Rotunda at noon Feb. 20. The city's official centennial bash gets going that night with a fancy party at the Palace of Fine Arts, the only building left standing from the exposition.

The Swedes will share the bill with San Francisco's celebrated **Gamelan Sekar Jaya** — the Balinese dancers who performed here in 1915, 34 years before Indonesian independence, represented the colonial Dutch East Indies — and the **Margaret Jenkins Dance Company**, led by a San Franciscan whose family was here before 1915.

When the professional Swedish dancers finish their set, the local Swedes will be invited to join them for a traditional *hambo*, a couples dance in brisk three-fourths time.

“We're hoping for 50 to 70 people, but wouldn't it be fun if there were 300?” says Mushet, who learned a lot about the exposition, its cross-cultural impact and its discriminatory treatment of performers of color from reading **Laura Ackley's** book “**San Francisco's Jewel City: The Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915**” and from conversations with the author.

One of those doing the *hambo* will be choreographer **Carlos Carvajal**, an artistic director of the Ethnic Dance Festival. Mushet knew he was of Filipino ancestry but learned only while preparing for the centennial that Carvajal is half Swedish.

“All these wonderful connections have happened in the course of developing these programs,” says Mushet, whose organization is presenting a free monthly performance at City Hall through Dec. 4, the date the 1915 fair closed, in addition to its big two-week June festival, which for the first time since 2010 will take place at the Palace of Fine Arts. The festival, which has been performed there since it began 36 years ago, is lobbying the city to save the theater by insisting that whoever gets the new lease on the landmark building, vacated a few years ago by the **Exploratorium**, will keep the theater going.

As far as Mushet can tell from the records, the Ethnic Dance Festival has never presented a Swedish group. Why hasn't it?

“That’s a good question,” she says. “I think there’s a perception that the Ethnic Dance Festival, because of the word 'ethnic,' is non-European. The festival, which is programmed from auditions, has been misunderstood in that way. We’ve had Irish dancers and Scottish dancers and always Spanish flamenco dancers.”

In the Bay Area, she goes on, “there are many people who have chosen to master a cultural tradition that’s not of their own ethnicity. One of the lead dancers of Gamelan Sekar Jaya is African American. There are great classical Indian dancers who are Caucasian and Japanese. That’s one of the things I love about the festival.”

For more information, go to www.worldartswest.org.

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