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Ethnic Dance revelations mark Festival opening

By Allan Ulrich

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Photo: RJ Muna

Genki Watanabe and Kristi Tsukida of San Francisco Awakko-ren, which performed “Awa Odori,” a traditional Japanese ensemble celebrating ancestors.

Even in its 39th year, the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival is still uncovering examples of the Bay Area’s inexhaustible cultural bounty and displaying them with uncommon flair. That was clearly evident when the festival opened Saturday, July 8, at the War Memorial Opera House.

Every visit to the festival delivers revelations. Before Saturday I had never heard of San Francisco Awakko-ren. But the company’s festival debut was “Awa Odori,” a traditional Japanese ensemble celebrating ancestors, was wonderful in configuration and musicality. A serpentine promenade precedes a mixed dance — the men in printed skirts; the women in red kimonos and headdresses that resemble a Le Corbusier building.

The most remarkable aspect of the performance was the live music accompanying all eight companies, a first in my years of festival attendance. The Opera House’s superior acoustics

exerted an almost alchemical effect on the dancing, and it did not hurt to engage outstanding musicians like Zakir Hussain and John Santos.

Political grievances were often submerged in superior dancing and infectious music. You might never guess that De Rompe y Raja was dancing about colonial subjugation of the African population (by the Spanish) in Peru. The dancing was robust and the musical contribution, including solos on the donkey's jaw, were fascinating. Political ends also motivated the sequence featuring Patrick Makuakane's popular Na Lei Hulu I Ka Wekiu company. Makuakane recalled Hawaii's disinclination to be annexed to the United States in a rhythmic ensemble that pitted sticks against poles. Earlier, Makuakane set a lovely, flowing women's ensemble to Delibes' "Viens, Mallika" duet, sung onstage by soprano Maya Kherani and countertenor Cortez Mitchell.

Much of the performing at the festival blurs the line between amateur and professional. The Pilipino Folk Ensemble, LIKHA, revived its evergreen "Birds in Flight," and the troupe never looked better. The men brandish slats on both arms, the women manipulate oversized shawls, and the unisons add up to a stirring spectacle. Festival debutant Ramón Ramos Alayo re-created a Cuban street party, with flouncing skirts and unpredictable leaps. The finale, an Afro-Cuban coronation celebration, immersed the stage in bodies swaying to an intoxicating score.

The show opened with a specimen of white European ethnic dance, a smooth 19th century ballroom party, dispatched with much elegance by members of the Academy of Danse Libre. In context, all those gloved couples yielding to the charms of the waltzes and polkas of the time really do suggest a historical era.

Jack Carpenter has lit the show with his customary finesse. Artistic directors Carlos Carvajal and C.K. Ladzekpo managed transition reasonably well, with one slip-up. Antonia Minnecola proved a pedestrian exponent of North Indian kathak, and even her illustrious husband (Hussain) could not salvage this interminable sequence.

At intermission, World Arts West, which produces the festival, bestowed the Malonga Casquelourd Lifetime Achievement Award on Naomi Diouf, artistic director of Diamano Coura West African Dance Company.

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

San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival: Through 2 p.m. Sunday, July 16, War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness, San Francisco. \$25-\$45. [\(415\) 392-4400](tel:4153924400). www.sfethnicedancefestival.org