

S.F. Ethnic Dance Festival: more than entertainment

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LIKHA Filipino Ensemble performs indigenous dances of Palawan's Batak people
Courtesy photo

Cultures meet in a spirited inclusionary atmosphere

Rating: 5 stars
By Janos Gereben

Artistic bliss and emotional impact combined again and again at today's opening performance of the two-week long 2016 [San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival](#).

Probably the world's biggest and most varied such festival, it represents San Francisco Bay Area's hundred-plus ethnic cultural organizations by the audition-winning 32 companies and their 400 performers in the [Palace of Fine Arts Theater](#).

At the opening matinee, that mix of bliss and impact came soon after the program began. Having attended most of the festival's 38 seasons, I am certain it was not the novelty of all that "exotica," ranging from Okinawa to Cambodia; no, all credit is due to the organizers and performers.

That first of a number of peak experiences occurred after an unusual and superb nine-woman performance from Shambhavi's International School of Kathak as vocalist Saneyee Purandare stayed on stage and sang a simple, quiet Indian melody. Entering from the wings, Azriel Goldschmidt of the next group, the San Francisco Flamenco [Dance](#) Company, joined the Kathak singer in a duet, his Spanish song coalescing with the Indian raga as if it was always meant to be one work, one voice.

At a time when exclusionary dogma is raising its vile head, this instance of the seamless union of two greatly distant cultures was deeply moving.

What's amazing about the festival is the consistent high quality of dancing and live musical accompaniment from organizations consisting mostly or entirely of amateurs, not even all from the culture represented.

On Saturday, performances and spectacular costumes followed one another, from the Harsanari Indonesian (Sundanese) Dance Company; Ballet Folklórico Netzahualcoyotl (indigenous communities from Veracruz, the men's fantastic hats are decorated with thorns and eagle feathers); Parangal Dance Company featuring the art of Luzon, the Philippines; Chinese Performing Arts of America presenting a story from the voyages of 19th century Pacific Mail Steamship; and dance and music of Okinawa, Bolivia, Senegal-Mauritania.

The festival's [detailed program booklet](#) provides information for concerts on June 11-12 and 18-19. As if she had anything to do with it, Executive Director Julie Mushet apologized to the audience for parking problems, and allowance was made for seating latecomers without interrupting the show, but there is no excuse for local audiences to disregard the impossibilities of parking in the Marina. Just give it extra time, and circle the Palace lagoon where tourists come and go, opening up spaces (no meters!). If you get to the theater too early, there are lobby performances beginning 45 minutes before show time.

Meanwhile, the festival and its parent organization, World Arts West, are facing [daunting challenges that make the present difficult](#), the future uncertain. Local government and community support for such a vital and essential enterprise must be forthcoming.