

DANCE

San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival opens at Opera House

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The San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, now in its 39th season, is an intoxicating kaleidoscope — vibrantly-hued costumes, soulful live music and exuberant dancing that spotlights cultures from around the world. It feeds all your senses, even ones you didn't know you had.

Discover this mind-expanding experience over the next two weekends, as the festival is presented for the first time in its history at San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House.

"Our festival is unique in the entire world," says co-artistic director Carlos Carvajal. "It includes the best performers from all different ethnicities. While other festivals bring them in from other countries, ours are all local."

With the Bay Area's breadth of diversity, it is home to internationally acclaimed artists such as extraordinary percussionists Zakir Hussain and John Santos, as well as flamenco dancer La Tania. All three are performing in the festival this season.

CK Ladzekpo, the event's other co-artistic director, invited Santos and his sextet to collaborate with the Aloyo Dance Company, led by local Cuban choreographer and dancer Ramón Ramos Alayo, on "Festejos Caribeños." The music starts with a New Orleans funeral dirge and piano interlude, builds to a rumba, with a brilliant call and response from the horns, and concludes with a dense, spirited salsa and street-style Cuban Carnival rhythm that brings the crowd to its feet.

Santos says, "The form has strong roots in Congo, Yoruba and Abakuá societies. It expresses Cuba's violent colonial history and carries the courage of Africans and Afro-Cubans who dared play the outlawed African rhythms. It continues to evolve as vibrant expres-



SAN FRANCISCO ETHNIC DANCE FESTIVAL

BITEZO BIA KONGO, with Miyakou Boukaka, left, Arnaud Loubayi and Bret Arnold Balekita, will perform traditional Congolese dances as part of the second weekend at the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival.

sion and living resistance."

During the festival's second weekend La Tania will give her farewell performance before retiring. Her fluid arm movements, expert flicking of her long ruffled train and the gravity-defying swirling of her shawl are mesmerizing for audiences. If you haven't seen her lately, do yourself a favor and catch this performance.

The festival was launched in 1978. Executive director Julie Mushet explains, "Grants for the Arts, which distributes the city's Hotel Tax Fund, saw all these dance groups but didn't know how to help them. Instead of giving small grants to lots of them, they started the festival with the idea that it would be a better use of the money."

The only person who has been continuously involved since the start — award-winning lighting designer Patty Ann Farrell — says, "I never thought it would be long-

term because it was a city-funded project. Every year I was amazed I would be hired again. The performances were in cultural centers all around the city. It was a good thing we were young, because ... two of us would change the floor and bring in lighting and sound. We'd set up, rehearse, do the show. When it was over, we packed it all up in the truck and went on to the next one.

"We tinkered constantly with the format to make it entertaining and educate the audience," Farrell continues. "It started in a travelogue format — lecture and dance, lecture and dance. But it was too long, and we couldn't let the audience get bored. Eventually we took out the dialogue, and the show flowed, creating a seamless production."

"We started performing at the Palace of Fine Arts the second year, but just occasionally, not a three- or four-day run, as it is now.

I had this dream to be in the Opera House since we began. This is dance and music together, and it needs to be seen by everybody."

Mushet, too, is thrilled about the venue change from the Palace to the Opera House. She says that, in addition to the current season, the festival has secured its new home for 2018, to celebrate its 40th anniversary. Her wish list includes still performing there when the United Nations commemorates its 75th year in 2020.

Ladzekpo sums up the significance of the Ethnic Dance Festival, pointing out that it promotes cross-cultural understanding among both the companies that perform together on a single stage and among the different ethnic groups in the audience. "When we get to know each other, respect emerges, and that spells peace. We are the United Nations of dance. We are the whole world, without the politics."