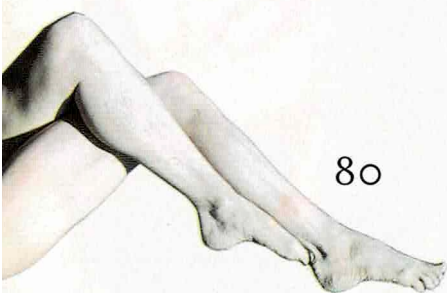
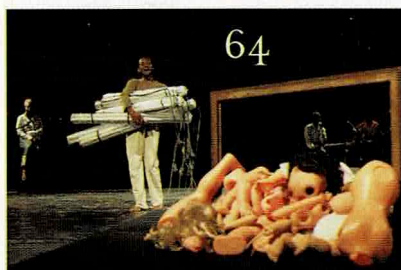


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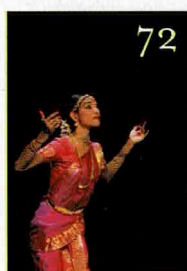
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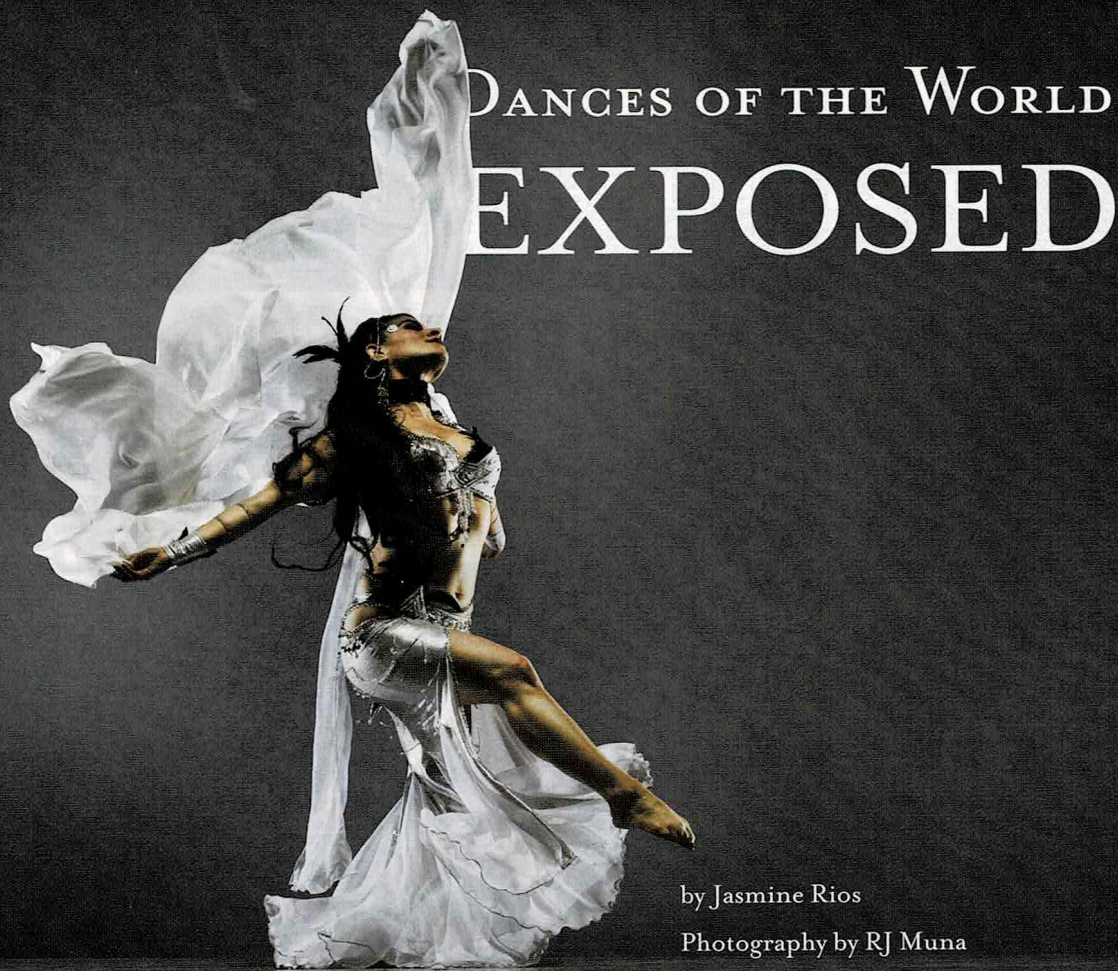
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DANCES OF THE WORLD EXPOSED

Middle Eastern
Dancer, Shabnam

by Jasmine Rios

Photography by RJ Muna

World dance gives shape to the world around us. It enlightens, educates and entertains. Ethnic dance festivals serve as an ideal outlet for world dance artists to present their art in a pronounced theatre setting. They also provide an excellent platform for world dance artists to gain further exposure that leads to expanding their audience. Dance enthusiasts also find enrichment through their introduction to a world of cultural intrigue and through observing ethnic dance movement that incorporates other art forms such as history, poetry and drama.

Ethnic dance festivals can be found in numerous cities across the country. The San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival exemplifies what these celebrations are all about on a grand scale. The San Francisco festival is in its thirtieth year of presenting Bay Area audiences with a generous taste of world dance from an enormous melting pot of Capoeira, Yang-Ge, Odissi, Hungarian Folk, Flamenco and many other exotic delights.

World Arts West is the driving force behind this annual celebration that was designed to create performance opportunities for artists to present the dance expressions of their cultural heritage. The organization is based at the historic Fort Mason Center in the Marina district along San Francisco Bay and is run by the skillful hand of executive director, Julie Mushet.

Under Mushet's leadership, the organization has lived up to its mission: "to provide a venue for work that is based on traditions with cultural origins - including sacred, social and secular/vernacular dance genres rooted in ethnic, traditional, national, religious and cultural communities."

"Ethnic dance in the Bay Area has evolved into what is considered the most vibrant ethnic dance community in the world. More than four hundred ethnic dance groups reside in the Bay Area. The San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival has been credited with helping to create this dynamic, because the festival stage

was one of the few places in America where these artists would be given access to top notch production support, including lighting and scenic designers, and a professional stage crew. Many presenters have believed that ethnic dance is best presented outdoors, in parks and street festivals, and our audiences are always thrilled to see so many of the world's dance forms presented respectfully and professionally on the stage of the beautiful Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco," shares Mushet.

Since 1978, over twenty-thousand dancers from more than one hundred different cultures have performed at the festival. As the largest multi-cultural event in the country, a great event deserves a great venue and World Arts West has ensured these standards are met each year. For the last twenty years, the festival has been held at one of San Francisco's most spectacular landmarks, the majestic Palace of Fine Arts.

This June, the festival celebrated its thirtieth anniversary through a month long series of special performances and events. Over the course of four weeks, ethnic dance workshops, film presentations, social gatherings and five hundred Northern California-based artists performed. Also for the first time, an exclusive exhibit featuring photos by festival photographer RJ Muna were put on display at the San Francisco International Airport. Muna's photos remain on display through August 11.

The festival's opening night gala held on June seventh at the Palace of Fine Arts was a spectacular affair featuring international food and invigorating cultural dance. Nine different artists/groups performed, including the

long-time festival favorite, Theatre Flamenco and Korean dance troupe, OngDance Company.

For each subsequent weekend in June, nine different artists/groups performed. During week two, Middle Eastern dancer, Shabnam was among featured artists. Murphy Irish Dancers were featured among others during week three, followed by YaoYong Dance in week four. As always, the festival was a remarkable success.

Listening to patron responses after a festival is also a fascinating part of the experience. Mushet recalls one patrons comments - "A San Francisco policeman shared that he'd danced in the festival years before as a lad in the Murphy Irish Dancers - a rewarding experience that brought pleasant memories and a smile to his face."

Devoted patron and former professional Arabic, Greek, and Flamenco dancer, Monique Majoun shared, "I attended the very first show in 1978 and have been going for years." For Majoun, programs featuring the next generation of artists in her previous dance professions have always been a major draw. Having studied with Theatre Flamenco's Miguel Santos in years past, Majoun treasures those moments watching her mentor perform in the festival.

Miguel Santos is the founder and former artistic director of Theatre Flamenco, one of the oldest dance companies in the city and state and the first American dance company to produce full Spanish dance productions in the US. Santos shares, "I've been with Theatre Flamenco for 41 years and with the festival since it began in 1978. I also studied flamenco in Spain and lived there. No other company there has been around as long as Theatre Flamenco."

OngDance Company





Murphy Irish Dancers

Santos has made a significant artistic contribution to the dance community over the years and has been recognized for his achievements. In early June, a pre-dance festival ceremony was held at the de Young Museum to present four local dance artists with Life Achievement Awards. Santos was among those four recipients.

Theatre Flamenco acknowledges the important impact the festival has had on the company's success. The numerous performance opportunities and exposure the company has received from each annual festival has helped position Theatre Flamenco as a leading dance company in its field.

The company has done very well for itself as a result of loyal patronage and steady student enrollment in flamenco classes. "Theatre Flamenco has also been very fortunate for receiving sup-

port through grants from the San Francisco Arts Commission and the San Francisco Foundation over the years," says Santos. Like a true artist, Santos maintains, "It's not about the money. It's the exposure."

Many regular dance festival participants have come a long way since they started performing at the event years ago. For as long as the interest in world dance continues to increase, dancers and their art forms will prosper.

Each year, World Arts West holds auditions in January at the Palace of Fine Arts. Applications and specifications are posted online a few months prior to auditions. Independent artists and dance troupes do need to reside in the Bay Area to audition. However, if an artist outside of the Bay Area is invited by a local artist or group, they may participate.

World dance forms yet to be represented at the festival include Italian, German, French, and Ethiopian dance forms. These groups are highly encouraged to audition. World Arts West is also exploring the possibility of touring the 2009 dance festival. Details are yet to come, but will be posted online once the information becomes available. To learn more about World Arts West and the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, visit www.worldartswest.org.

Jasmine Rios is a freelance writer and consultant for the arts. For questions or comments, email minacommunications@gmail.com or visit www.minacommunications.com.



Yao Yong Dance