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Something old and something new

International Festival at Overture is a multicultural wonderland

BY VICTORIA DAVIS

FEBRUARY 27, 2020

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ARTS EVENTS

CANCELED: Wicked

MAR 22, 2020

6:30 PM

OVERTURE CENTER-OVERTURE HALL

ISTHMUS PICKS THEATER & DANCE

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BOOKS PUBLIC NOTICES

CANCELED: Following



MATZNER PHOTOGRAPHY

Tania Tandias Flamenco & Spanish Dance performs dances from southern Spain at 1:35 p.m. in Overture Hall. They are one of 39 acts scheduled for the fest.

For 39 years, the [International Festival](#) has brought the world to Madison in the form of Taiwanese puppet shows, flamenco dances, Scottish bagpipes and myriad other cultural spectacles. With 39 performing artists from Dane County and more than 45 food and fair trade

Oliver

MAR 23, 2020

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MAR 23, 2020 - MAR 26, 2020

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vendors, this year's festival on Feb. 29 will be one of the largest so far. The packed schedule includes newcomers like **Leslie Damaso**, who performs traditional songs from the Philippines, and what is believed to be the festival's first-ever Japanese performance with Beni Daiko's taiko drumming.

It also includes a Greek dance troupe that has been with the festival since its birth at the old Madison Civic Center. "When I first moved here in 1972, I didn't know we had so many cultures," says Vicki Knoedler, the founder of Mesoghios Greek Dance Troupe, which performed at the festival in 1981 when it was called the International Holiday Festival. "But this festival has gotten bigger and more beautiful. I've met so many different people, and they've been coming like crazy to see us for years."

Knoedler now uses a wheelchair and is no longer able to join the dancers on the stage. But she still coaches them and makes a point to attend every festival. "I feel that this festival is my child," says Knoedler. "I wouldn't want to abandon it."

The International Festival has grown over the years to fill nearly every space in Overture, minus the downstairs Playhouse. Meri Ekberg, the center's programming and community engagement coordinator, says the programming demonstrates the rich cultural diversity of Madison.

ERIC BAILLIES



Beni Daiko, a Japanese-inspired drum troupe, is performing for the first time at International Festival in 2020.

"A couple of years ago I started doing a cultural analysis, looking at what cultures we had represented in the festival compared to stats from Dane County and the city," says Ekberg. "We're trying to fill in the gaps to make sure our program is as representative of the Madison community as it can be."

The group Beni Daiko performs taiko, a traditional drumming style practiced at Japanese temples and festivals. Junko Yamauchi, a former elementary school teacher from Osaka, Japan, started the group in 2012. “When I was little, I grew up listening to those drums,” says Yamauchi. Beni Daiko will perform the traditional ogre drum dance “Oni-Daiko” and other short songs at the International Festival. “It was always in the community. I wanted to bring the drums’ positive energy to the people of Madison.”

“All the performers at the fest have this sense of wanting to share a part of their culture they connect with the most,” adds Damaso, whose family is from the Philippines. She will be performing kundiman, folk music that has often been linked to political protest. “A lot of people come to the U.S. and feel like they have to assimilate because it’s easier,” says Damaso. “But there’s this part of you that goes missing or gets kept inside. Music is my own way of connecting with my past and my history.”

Damaso, a Mineral Point-based music teacher and painter, will appear with Madison’s jazz-meets-rock ensemble **Mr. Chair**. She has been working with the band to reimagine a collection of kundiman songs for an upcoming album. “On the surface, kundiman is revolutionary songs, but if you read the lyrics, they’re about love,” says Damaso. “You can read it as love between two people, but it’s actually love for the country. I want to share with my community here what the essence of being a Filipino is.”

This year’s International Festival will also feature interactive activities. Sarvodaya USA is hosting a community mandala art project and Wisconsin’s ESL Institute is providing language lessons.

“Americans sometimes shut their ears and their eyes to other cultures,” says Knoedler. “That’s not good. You need to learn and learn more. There’s so much wisdom when you learn more about other different people. I wish for the festival to keep growing and growing.”

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