

Finding the culture of the Silk Road

By Andrew Gilbert Correspondent San Jose Mercury News / San Jose Mercury News

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Long before electronic communications started inexorably shrinking distances, the deep-seated impulse to exchange knowledge and goods began binding humanity together. Linking far-flung cultures through a steady flow of ideas, technologies, raw materials and finished products, the Silk Road emerged some 2,000 years ago, extending from China of the Han Dynasty and successive Persian empires to the Roman Empire and the Western Mediterranean.

The Festival of the Silk Road, which presents music, dance and poetry from the cultures connected by those ancient trade routes, celebrates its fourth year Sunday at Mexican Heritage Plaza. Produced by Afsaneh Arts and Culture Society, an organization dedicated to Persian dance, the event has grown, much like the Silk Road did itself, to include performers from Turkey, China, India, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

"We quickly found as we started to do these performances that it was very difficult to separate along national borders," says Sharlyn Sawyer, Afsaneh's founder and director. "The Silk Road speaks to that conduit of arts, goods and ideas that stretched across Eurasia. It's also a metaphor that gives us room to grow and change."

The festival opens in the afternoon with free presentations in the Mexican Heritage Plaza gardens featuring folk dancing, cultural exhibits, workshops and a Silk Road bazaar. The evening performance is a ticketed event that includes the Tarangini School of Kathak Dance, Yore Turkish Folkdance Ensemble, Niosha Dance Academy, Ballet Afsaneh, and Chinese Performing Arts of America, which present a dramatic dragon dance to mark the Year of the Dragon.

"I'm so excited about this dragon dance," Sawyer says. "It's not like at the New Year's parade where you can see the dancers' legs. In the theater with the black light, it looks like the dragon is rolling and swirling in a night sky chasing this pearl of wisdom."

Like many of the companies featured at the Silk Road festival, San Jose-based Chinese Performing Arts has participated since the beginning in 2008. The festival grew out of Ballet Afsaneh's home season, which the company has presented in the South Bay since 2001.

With so many cultural organizations facing hard times during the economic crash, Sawyer figured that pooling resources made sense, and the Festival of the Silk Road has defied the odds by keeping ticket prices low (a successful fundraising campaign helped fund this year's event).

Though she lives in rural west Marin County, Sawyer decided that San Jose was the ideal location for the Silk Road festival. Ballet Afsaneh has a long history of performing in the area, and many of the arts and cultural organizations that might be interested in collaborating are nearby.

"There are large Iranian, Azeri, Armenian and Afghan communities in the South Bay," she says. "And we have received quite a bit of support from the city. The Mexican Heritage Plaza is a perfect venue for this festival, with its wonderful outdoor area, excellent 500-seat theater and plenty of free parking.

"Where could you find that in San Francisco or the East Bay?"

Many of the companies involved are pulling together special programming for the event. Ballet Afsaneh, which often performs with recorded music, is collaborating with Iranian percussionist Pezhham Akhavass, who is also teaching a workshop focusing on daf, a large Middle Eastern frame drum.

Yöre Folk Ensemble, the Turkish dance company based at Stanford University, is also performing with special guest musicians. Yöre features professionals and students from across the Bay Area. The company is presenting dances from Rize, a region on the Black Sea in northeastern Turkey.

"We have been working for a long time on these Black Sea dances," says Mehpare Pam Askin, who founded the

company. "We perform dances from every region, and like to switch every year or so to keep it interesting.

"What's special about this performance is that one musician, Ayca Yeter, is from the region and an authentic tulum player, which is a small bagpipe."

Born in central Turkey and raised in Istanbul, Askin has found the Festival of the Silk Road to be a particularly elucidating event. By highlighting the deep currents connecting Silk Road cultures, Sunday's festival provides insight into the way that history continues to shape our world.

"If you go through eastern Turkey, there are some dances where steps are so close to Iranian dance," Askin says. "Until I got involved in this project, I never saw a fan dance before or an Afghan dance.

"It's wonderful to be with the different cultures and making this journey through the past."

festival of the silk road

When: 7 p.m. Sunday

Where: Mexican Heritage Theater,
1700 Alum Rock Road, San Jose

Tickets: \$25-\$35, 800-838-3006, www.dancesilkroad.org