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## BRIDGING CULTURES AND IGNITING A PASSION FOR LIFE!

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### *A QUEST TO DISAMBIGUATE “WORLD DANCE”*

#### **PRESENTERS**

Smita Alves, *Artistic Director, Bhakti Bhav Dance*

Janell Burgess, *Artistic Director, Spectrum Dance Center & Jazz Spectrum Dance Company*

Nika Imani, *Artistic Director, Nika Imani Dance & Dance Educator, Spectrum Dance Center*

Ismael Murillo, *Dance Educator, OCSA & Company Member, JSDC & NBDT*



Tony Mierzwicki - Tony M Photography



M. Imani



## **MEET THE EDUCATORS!**

### **Janell Burgess...**

I am the owner and founder of Spectrum Dance Center located in Lake Forest, CA. It is the mission of Spectrum Dance Center and myself to develop artists and projects that inspire healing, bridge cultures, create unity, and ignite a passion for life. Every Monday night I meet with SDC's collegiate scholarship students to provide mentorship & a platform for professional growth. The students attentively listen to my tangents on the field of dance fondly refer to my passionate lectures as their personalized "TED Talks." Most recently I found myself on a rant about, "You Become What You Think About..."

...which led me to reflect upon my own personal journey and history. "How did I become a dance studio owner?" As I continued on in my lecture, I professed to my students, "The foundation you lay today is who you will become 10 years from now..." and 10 years ago, I was dancing my heart out in West Africa and Southeast Asia.

I was culturally enmeshed and developed a deep love for dance forms around the world. In my early 20's my heart was penetrated by the love I experienced as I stepped out of my American dance shoes in to the customs and traditions that were deeply different from everything I had ever known. As I peeled back the layers of myself and began to embrace other movement forms as if they were my own, I was met with profound acceptance by others from around the world. I envisioned myself as the conduit for building cross-cultural connections, developing mutual dance exchange programs, and creating a platform where dance was the voice of unity.

Fast forward 10 years, and today I have built a multi-cultural facility called "Spectrum Dance Center" that supports over 25 national & international dance educators. Together, we have a space where the artistic voices of all nationalities, creeds, and differently-abled people can be seen, heard, and share their passion for culture and dance.

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## Smita Alves...

I am the founder and director of Bhakti Bhav Dance - a Kathak dance school based out of Orange County, CA. Kathak is one of nine forms of Indian classical dance, and originated around 400B.C. in Northern India. Kathak is a story-telling dance with aspects of abstract technique using hand mudras, fast footwork with ankle bells, and quick spins, following precise cycles of rhythm. In contrast there are also slower pieces of dance acting, using facial expressions and everyday gestures to retell historical and mythological stories within India and influenced from the Hindu and Muslim traditions.

Growing up in Orange County in the 1980's and having first generation parents who emigrated from India, people were never clear on what my ethnicity was. At that time East Indian or South Asian was not commonly used. Was I hispanic? Middle Eastern? I couldn't be Asian? At that time the word Indian was still used to label Native Americans, so that was equally confusing. Was I even Indian if I was born in the US? What about the Indians who thought I was too American (ha!), so was it about how I looked or what I related to? I have equal pride in my ancestral heritage as I do in being born and raised in the US. I would have loved it if people just asked about my background and listened to me, rather than find ways to relate me to someone else. It would have validated and empowered me. I mean no one wants to be told they are like someone else. We all thrive on our individuality. We all want to tell our own story.

My parents enrolled me in Kathak at age 11 to connect me to the Indian culture. Ironically I felt my Indian ethnicity and culture drew me apart from my peers, so I was initially hesitant to try it. Yes, there is a huge cultural component in Kathak, but as a classical dance form, there is also a precision and foundation of technique that is rigorous and demands a labor of love. This became my joy in Kathak, not just that it is a cultural dance. I could get lost in the precision, the speed, the technique. As I grew older and learned how to express myself in dance I could appreciate the stories and culture more and learn how to make it relevant to my life experience. I had to bridge my own culture gap to begin to appreciate the art form. I spend much of my time trying to educate and inform parents, students, peers, colleagues as to what Kathak is, seeing confusion even within the Indian community. Many parents, like mine, are enrolling their kids in my classes to connect them to the culture. I teach many both first and second

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generation Indian Americans. I am always looking for ways to connect Kathak to their lives because there in lies the purpose of dance, not just to learn a culture, but to learn an art form and how to find your voice and speak from your heart through movement. I love to advocate for my art form. I love to teach about the culture and history of Kathak because that is what makes it what it is. But ultimately I love to give the experience of movement and self expression!

I want people to experience the beauty of Kathak, but not through the lens of it being a World Dance, Eastern Dance, or Cultural Dance. We need to share our knowledge of dance from across the world and be specific about it. It will empower the teachers, the performers, the students already learning the style, as well as the students who are introduced to it and have never done it before. It will uplift everyone who can share in this experience.

### **Nika Imani...**

My name is Nika Imani. I am a dancer, instructor and choreographer of classical and folkloric dances of Iran. I was born and raised in Iran in a post-revolution and post-war environment. This was a society that had gone through social and political turbulence caused by the 1979 revolution followed by the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Since the early days of the Islamic revolution, dance was considered to be perverse, a great sin, immoral, and corrupting. As a result, the art of dancing became forbidden, public dance classes shut down, and participating in any form of public dance was illegal. Social dancing turned to an underground activity that was only practiced at house parties and private wedding celebrations. During this time, there were limited "underground" dance classes taught by dancers who were trained during the Shah's period. No dance instructor wanted to be recognized or caught by the government. Being caught had consequences such as monetary or prison charges. Regardless of all the pressure, the hard work of these artists prevented dance from disappearing.

It was during this time and in this atmosphere that I started my formal dance training. I was lucky to be in a family who valued dance and music. My mom found me an "underground" dance class where I learned traditional Persian dancing. My dance classes were held in the living room of my instructor's small apartment in Tehran where she managed to teach group classes. Taking this dance class was the cornerstone of a beautiful journey. It allowed me to

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discover a new passion which became a big part of my life later on. As I grew up, my love for dance grew; However, there were not many opportunities available to me to expand my knowledge of dance. About 20 years after the revolution when I was a teenager, theatrical dance started to re-appear with a lot of restrictions. After graduating from high school, as I was searching for an opportunity to develop my dance skills, I moved to the US to obtain a higher education. Living in the US fascinated me with all the possibilities that presented themselves on my path, and allowed me to experience different dance styles. Meanwhile, living outside of Iran didn't stop me from learning and dancing traditional Persian dancing. In fact, it directed my journey to focus on sharing this beautiful art with others. Sharing an elegant and graceful dance that is inspired by poetry, nature, Persian miniature paintings, and architecture.... Suddenly I felt I had a lot of untold stories to tell. I realized that I was very passionate about preserving the dances and culture of my home country. I appreciated the freedom in America and decided to add to its diversity and beauty by sharing my culture and dance. Today, I see dance as a powerful language to promote love and unity between people from different cultures. I enjoy sharing my passion for dance and my cultural arts through teaching and performances.

I have had the pleasure of collaborating with Spectrum Dance center where we bridge cultures through dance. I have been able to introduce this art form to children with no background in this culture. Adding these dancers to my class, introduced new perspectives to the class that benefited both the existing students and the new students. While the existing students learned how to share their cultural heritage with other cultures, the new students were introduced to new music, rhythm, movements, and techniques. While the new students expressed that they found the music to be very different from what they heard before, they found similarities between this dance form and ballet. As an educator, I admit that this has been a great learning experience for myself to find ways to better facilitate exchanging cultures at an early age.

As I further reflect on this matter, I find this work to be fundamentally very important because it elevates understanding and compassion between different cultures at an early age. Imagine a world where cultural differences are no longer a problem, instead we celebrate our cultural diversities. At the end, today as we witness history being made in my home country, Iran while a women-led revolution is formed to fight for "woman-life-freedom", I would like to invite you all

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to be the voice of the Iranian people, dance for those who can't dance, and benefit from the cultural diversity in America.

## **Ismael Murillo...**

My name Ismael Murillo and I was born and raised in Michoacan, Mexico. Because of my beginnings in a foreign land. My life experiences as an immigrant have made me more tolerant and appreciative of other cultures. Even though I was not able to train in the performing arts world in my country, I had the desire to perform and express myself in art. In the US I have been fortunate to expand my social and cultural interaction through the art of dance. I can truly say I'm living "the American Dream".

Dance has given me so many tools which has equipped me to be successful as a professional artist. From the start, I realized that the performing arts were the bridge between languages, traditions and cultures. Through art I was able to break barriers which allowed me to embrace others and now I'm inspiring new generations through performing and teaching. Dance has been my physical therapy throughout my stroke recovery process. I am living proof that cross-training is the key to stimulate the body as a whole. I have embraced all forms of body movement especially yoga and other balance techniques. Through my studies in Kinesiology I have gained a wide understanding of my body and the relationship with movement and function. Moreover, I have discovered that by taking dance to a professional level, it has given me self-discipline that surpasses many other disciplines in its depth and dedication. This discipline has been socially beneficial and grounding for my development. The motivation and examples of strength given to me by my dance family has been simply outstanding. I'm here today with you because of my love for Dance

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## **Goals**

In this discussion, it is our goal to disambiguate world dance, give identity to the nationalities and dance forms represented on this panel, and raise awareness around the possibilities in finding common ground thru cross-cultural dance forms within the classroom as well as the community at large. Exposing our youth to new experiences and different cultures.

### **Cultures and Dance Forms Represented in This Specific Panel Will Be:**

- Smita Alves - Kathak Dance of Northern India
- Janell Burgess - American Jazz Dance of North America
- Nika Imani - Classical Persian Dance of Iran
- Ismael Murillo - Baile Folklorico of Mexico

## **Research & Development**

### **1. Do you feel more confident in your abilities to recognize & identify different cultures?**

- Describe what you recall about each form...
  - A. Kathak
  - B. Persian
  - C. Folkloric
  - D. Differently-Abled
  - E. American

### **2. How will you share your personal story?**

- We want you to feel inspired and empowered thru...
    - A. Cross collaborative communication
    - B. Movement & Choreography
    - C. Written Words
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**3. What tools do you now have to create cross-cultural exchanges in you own community?**

- Seek out as informed artists...
  - A. Online resources
  - B. Reach out to us!

**4. How will you dance for healing and tolerance in our world?**

- See the future you want and it will become a reality...
  - A. Visualize
  - B. Talk about it with other like minded-people

**Audience Q & A**

- We all shared an experience together and yet our perspectives and interpretations about we saw are completely different....
    1. What were your observations?
    2. What did you noticed about the costumes?
    3. Did you notice familiar movements but possibly in a different sequence?
  
  - Often times we are very guarded with our questions in fear of being judged by others, yet in reality, many of us are having similar thoughts. Lets be honest....
    1. Did this experience bring up questions or feelings you are suppressing?
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## **Resources**

**Spectrum Dance Center**, *Dance Multi-Cultural & Education Facility Located in Lake Forest, CA*

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