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 Left and center, Rick Tate
 Right, El Paso City Parks & Recreation



VIVA FOLKLORICO!

Story by Lisa Kay Tate

Colorful swirling skirts, clicking cowboy boots, comic old men tapping their canes, a deer fleeing from hunters, a courtship played out while dancing around a sombrero — these are the familiar and beloved varieties of ballet folklórico found year-round in the borderland region’s festivals and celebrations.

One of this tradition’s most popular showcases is Viva! El Paso, whose 2017 season runs June 16 through July 31 at McKelligon Canyon.

Ballet folklórico is also the star attraction at Fiesta Latina June 16-18 at Western New Mexico University in Silver City.

And the most famous of all folklorico groups, Ballet Folklórico de Mexico de Amalia Hernández, performs June 4 at the Centrol Cultural Paso del Norte in Juárez.

The El Paso region is home to dozens of ballet folklórico troupes, many of them youth programs based at dance studios, with several of the dance companies spanning decades.

Among them is Ballet Folklórico Quetzales, founded 27 years ago by Jaime Carrasco, a graduate of the University of Chihuahua School of Fine Arts.

“For me, the most rewarding thing of working with this art form is that I am able to preserve our Mexican culture and I am privileged to transmit to future generations the joy and pride to feel and represent these traditions in front of an audience,” said Carrasco, who continues to serve as director and choreographer of Ballet Folklórico Quetzales.

He encourages people to “take the initiative to learn a little bit about the Mexican culture” through experiencing a folklórico performance.

“Ballet Folklórico Quetzales performs every Thursday at Delicias del Mar Restaurant and that is a great opportunity for locals to attend and appreciate our tra-

ditions,” Carrasco said. “Viva! El Paso takes place at McKelligon Canyon every summer, and is a great venue to appreciate and learn about the history of the El Paso area.”

Viva! El Paso

Viva! El Paso, created by Hector Serrano 40 years ago, has gone through various changes over the years and is now presented through the combined efforts of El Paso Community College, El Paso Community Foundation and El Paso Live. El Paso Community College’s Keith W. Townsend returns as director. The show’s script was written by Tony Award-winning playwright Marty Martin. The music features songs by Jim Ward and Gabriel Gonzalez, with performances by Mariachi Paso Del Norte and EPCC’s Mariachi Real De El Paso. This year’s show also marks the debut of Viva Kids, directed by Margaret Barreras.

El Paso Community Foundation Vice President Kathrin Berg says folklórico dance is an extremely important part to the pageantry of Viva! El Paso because the tradition of dance is “vital to all communities, and folkloric dance is a mainstay in our community.”

Like Carrasco, Berg said these dances help share the region’s stories.

“Every part of the world has its historical moves and dances that tell stories of their ancestry,” she said. “El Paso, with our unique mixture of cultures through the centuries, evolves into our own beautiful stories and dance — and music for that matter.”

Other familiar troupes in the area include Ballet Paso del Norte, Ballet Folklórico Aires Internacionales, Grupo Folklórico Valle del Sol, the award winning Ballet Folklórico Orgullo de mi Tierra, Paseo del Norte Churuhiu, San Elizario’s Grupo

Folklórico Awiratzi and several more. Las Cruces’s Ballet Folklórico Tierra del Encanto recently accompanied various mariachi groups for a special Christmas performance at the Rio Grande Theatre.

Ballet Folklórico Totec

One troupe that has been actively representing youth in the area is Ballet Folklórico Totec de La Fe, directed by Emmanuel Alfaro.

Alfaro began dancing at age 5, and teaching at age 15. Today, as a dance instructor for La Fe Culture and Technology Center, he works several evenings a week with Ballet Folklórico Totec, which consists of Segundo Barrio area youth ranging in age from 5 years old to high school seniors.

This spring alone, the troupe has performed a dinner show at La Fe Center, “Raíces De México,” participated in parades and hosted their first full performance at Chamizal National Memorial.

Like many traditional folklórico performances, the Ballet Folklórico Totec de La Fe provides not only a journey through the various regions of Mexico, but a trip back in time to the early days of the country’s indigenous people. Dances and styles cover the states of Jalisco, Michoacán, Veracruz, Yucatán and more.

One of the unique aspects of the troupe’s most recent performance is the inclusion of special needs dancers in one of its dances. These youth, some in wheelchairs, performed alongside the troupe’s other dancers.

Alfaro said this group of special needs dancers, who call themselves Estrellitas de Dios, has been a blessing to his own dancers as well. He explained to his dancers how much many people take for granted, including being able to get up and get a drink or water or walk across a room

on their own. To be able to be on stage and be part of the performance is tremendously rewarding for youth who might not be able to feel the freedom of dance. Some of them perform accompanied by their parents.

“You see these kids and it just brings a lump to your throat,” he said. “Having them as part of the program is like a present to the community,” Alfaro said. “It is a gift.”

Seventeen-year-old dancer Valeria Alfaro (daughter of Emmanuel) has been part of Ballet Folklórico Totec for a little over a year. She said one of the greatest things about performing with the group is it has helped her overcome her shyness.

“To me the most rewarding thing about Ballet Folklórico Totec de La Fe is I’ve come out of my shell,” she said. “I was always very shy, very isolated.”

Alfaro feels she will be able to use what she learned performing when she attends St. Mary’s University in San Antonio after graduation.

“Now, I’ve got the confidence to perform in front of people,” she said.

At the Chamizal

One of the most popular year-round venues for ballet folklórico is the Chamizal National Memorial. Recent performances included Ballet Folklórico Paso del Norte directed by Rodolfo Hernandez. The troupe was founded in 1978 at El Paso Community College, and has been a part of the area’s folklórico landscape ever since, representing the city in performances and events throughout the southwest including New Mexico, Arizona, Utah and Colorado. Their recent performance, “Huapango 2017,” showcased the dances and culture of Veracruz.

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