

Weaving Spirits Festival to feature two-spirit performers

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Melissa Hudson Bell March 5, 2020 Updated: March 6, 2020, 10:08 am



Javier Stell-Frésquez (left) and Snowflake Towers perform “Chaac & Yum,” which will be featured at the Weaving Spirits Festival. Photo: Anth Bongco

Dance can express the moment in a kinetic display of movement, contextualize the past with elegant choreography or offer theories on what’s to come with body-twisting displays that can feel as foreign as the future. During the Weaving Spirits Festival, it will help us understand the place two-spirit people have in the Bay Area.

The festival, which runs Friday, March 6, through Sunday, March 8, at CounterPulse, offers an opportunity for two-spirit and indigenous performers to inspire one another and build community.

If the term “two-spirit” is new to you, the Bay Area American Indian Two-Spirits [website](#) informs: “Two-Spirit refers to the commonly shared notion among many Native American tribes that some individuals naturally possessed and manifested both a masculine and feminine spiritual qualities. American society commonly identifies Two-Spirit People as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transgender.” Two-spirit can also include folks who are gender queer

or have multiple gender identities.

This festival provides a forum for the spiritual, cultural and artistic expression of two-spirit people, and a meeting ground where others can experience their work. It will feature traditional indigenous forms, contemporary dance, experimental performance art and drag, performed by two-spirit indigenous artists from the Bay Area and across the nation.

Festival co-curator Javier Stell-Frésquez and Snowflake Towers — the co-collaborators of Chaac & Yum, a Two-Spirit Dance Project (featured in Saturday night's performance) — spoke to The Chronicle about their work as indigenous artists, and the festival's purpose.

Q: What inspired you to start the festival?

Stell-Frésquez: An evening of performance comes and goes. A festival can last forever. We want it to be an annual gathering. Our festival aims to create a platform and build a field. There are a lot of two-spirit artists scattered around within the indigenous art-making community and within activist spaces where a lot of our art and voice grow and evolve.

Our festival aims to give people a place to speak two-spirit artist to two-spirit artist or Native person to Native person, or even queer to queer. It's not the kind of space where people have to be translating all the time ... for presumed white audiences. And people can just be supported by ourselves, the curators, and by CounterPULSE to nurture their own voices.

Q: What parts of the festival are open to all, and what is intended as a dedicated space in which two-spirit indigenous people can support one another?

Stell-Frésquez: The entire festival's offerings are open to all, except for the massage workshop on Saturday evening. We are really excited for folks who don't identify as indigenous to come and witness the stories and engage. We are in such a powerful moment of increasing visibility of two-spirits and we are honored to be able to create a platform for that within our community, for our community and authored by our community.

Q: Any practical tips for how those who do not identify as part of the two-spirit indigenous community should respectfully engage with the events?

Stell-Frésquez: You just need to come with respectfulness and some self-awareness and integrity in how you hold yourself, and you'll be fine. ... You will receive a lot from being with us and listening to the knowledge and stories shared. There will be some performances with audience participation that really makes the experience so much more open, and it turns the performances into a dialogue.



Snowflake Towers (left) and Javier Stell-Frésquez perform "Chaac & Yum." Photo: Anth Bongco

Q: What events or performances on the bill are you particularly excited about?

Stell-Frésquez: I think both the opening and closing nights are going to be really powerful. Sunday is going to be an unforgettable closing. There is going to be a community gathering with free food in the afternoon. The Brush Arbor Gurlz (a Native American drag house that includes the award-winning co-curator of the festival, Landa Lakes) are performing. Sunday is a fundraiser for BAAITS, the organization that puts on the Two-Spirit Powwow. So you'll be supporting the larger community if you come ready to donate that Sunday.

Q: What advice for approaching this event might you have for people whose only familiarity with indigenous dance is powwow dance?

Towers: Native Americans are capable of more than one style of dancing and performance.

Stell-Frésquez: Snowflake loves an understatement, LOL. There are over 562 federally recognized tribes in the U.S., to say nothing of the hundreds unrecognized. Try to imagine that many styles of dance ... Now try to imagine a different dance for every life occasion, activity or season ... Now throw in a song or a joke or a poem for each. ... The festival offers just a taste of the many performance styles and forms Natives have been revitalizing and innovating in our living cultures.

Q: And the festival will give them a chance to see that firsthand?

Stell-Frésquez: What is done at this festival will be new and unfamiliar to a lot of folks. And hopefully if you come you may be provoked to consider what you experience ... based on your history, based on your ancestry, based on your sense of the symbols being utilized. As an artist, I am thinking about that experience of the audience in parallel with what I want to say, which often means that I have to choose in each moment, in each performance or at each stage of designing the work, who I am addressing and who is speaking through me.

Q: What distinguishes indigenous contemporary dance from contemporary dance?

Towers: Martha Graham and many other styles appropriated Native American and black movement and technique, but the Weaving Spirits Festival will feature indigenous artists in charge of their own narrative.

Stell-Frésquez: As an artist, I have ... learned from amazing mentors who have sown the first seeds of contemporary Native artistic practices. And, by the way, the traditional forms that people recognize as Native dance immediately — those are contemporary too; they are evolving all the time. The families and the various folks who hold those cultural spaces, even the ones who help hold the protocol around those cultural spaces, they shift, too, in how they do things. It is very hard to do the exact same dance the exact same way it was done before because the time is different, because the body that does it is different and because the audience or the community engaging it is different.

So, when we say that this festival is contemporary or that the art that we are making is contemporary, it is also quite traditional because tradition evolves.

Q: And as indigenous performance makers, can you share with audiences new to the form some of the ways you see your culture shaping your artistic process and/or what and how you choose to perform?

Towers: I was born indigenous and it's not a metaphor. I am closer to my land, my people and my ancestral culture than most people who have forgotten their own, by force or by choice. My resistance to colonialism and racism is to be who I am wherever I go, and in whatever I do.

Q: It seems that there has been a surge in opportunities for Bay Area folks to engage with indigenous dance — whether at the powwow, at dance venues, in performance activism at the Emeryville sacred shell-mound site, or elsewhere. How has this surge in public visibility come about?

Stell-Frésquez: I think a lot of the diversity work and the demands for increasing equity in the arts and culture field are creating an awareness that the arts world is missing out, and society in general is missing out (without Native voices). Native culture and art and religion

was heavily suppressed across the last few centuries, even made explicitly illegal until the Freedom of Religion Act of 1970. Our dances have been very powerful, and have been an integral part of life like so much of our creative expression and our medicinal practices.

The occupation of Alcatraz, now in its 50th anniversary, really was one of the first major moments of international visibility for struggles across indigenous nations. At Standing Rock, Native Americans and indigenous people from across the world took a heroic stance and put their bodies on the line in a way that changed hearts and minds all across the world.

And a very special thing that not everyone might have heard about at Standing Rock, was the creation of a Two-Spirit Nation camp there. The Two-Spirit Powwow honored the leaders of that camp the following year, and it's just one example of how indigenous visibility, creativity and our vibrant voice weaves through the political space, and now into so many cultural spaces.

The Continuous Thread exhibition that the San Francisco Arts Commission put on earlier this year is also a perfect example of indigenous voices standing up to insist on our sovereignty and legitimacy and our rights. ... These all come together in a beautiful expression.

Weaving Spirits Festival of Two-Spirit Performance: Dance, drum and other forms. 7-10 p.m. Friday, March 6, noon-10 p.m. Saturday, March 7, 5-8 p.m. Sunday, March 8. \$10-\$50. CounterPulse, 80 Turk St., S.F. www.counterpulse.org

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