

International Dance Festival highlights student diversity

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Shakespeare once wrote that “All the world’s a stage,” and all the world was on the stage Saturday, Feb. 21, as the 11th annual International Dance Festival filled the Collins Center for the Arts with a passion for both dance and diversity.

University of Maine students from across the globe danced traditional pieces from China, Vietnam, Ireland and Brazil, among other countries, to an audience of more than 750 students, faculty and community members.

“The University of Maine really is a diverse place and I think this is just sort of the showcase for it, really,” Sarah Joughin, Assistant Director of International Student & Scholar Services, said of the event.

With 14 dances representing more than two dozen cultural backgrounds, the crowd witnessed a cultural tour of the world in just under two hours.

“More people come every year. It’s a great opportunity for the campus to get that diversity that, really Culturefest in the fall and [International Dance Festival] in the spring, offers,” Jessica Bishop, dance coordinator of the festival, said.

“It’s a great opportunity to come together and just experience ‘around the world’ in Orono, Maine,” she said.

Joughin said the event brings a new cultural perspective to a state often ridiculed for its lack of diversity.

“To me I think what it shows is just how diverse we are,” Joughin said. “Being here in Maine, you know, ‘the whitest state in the nation,’ ‘we’re so not diverse.’ That’s a lot of times what you hear,” she said.

Initially a student idea, the festival began 11 years ago in Minsky Recital Hall, but the crowd quickly outgrew the capacity of that space. The next year, the festival was moved to the Collins Center with great success.

And today the festival has become a staple among the University’s multicultural events.

“One thing that we are really excited about is that, even within each piece, which typically represents a country, the dancers come from many different countries, so that just even more showcases the diversity,” Bishop said.

For those involved, the festival is not just about showing off their dancing. Rather, the event symbolizes a showcasing of their unique cultural identities.

Shirly Stephen is an Indian student who danced in the festival’s two Bollywood-inspired pieces, complete with brightly colored dresses and lavish hairstyles.

Stephen, who studies spatial information sciences, said dancing in the festival represents her diverse Indian origins.

“Dancing is something I would always do back home in India,” Stephen said. “India is a country with so much diversity. Every state has got its own culture, its own different kind of music, its own different kind of dance styles,” she said.

“I know that Bollywood is really famous amongst the international people and it has a huge Western influence, too,” Stephen said. “I’m really proud to represent a mixture of all these different styles to the international community.”

This is a sentiment shared by all dancers, none of whom are professionals, but only wish to share their heritages with their university community.

“A lot of the people from the community that come would expect to think that a lot of these students have professional training or have been lifelong dancers and that’s definitely not the case,” Bishop said. “It really shows the impact not only of culture, but also the arts for University students.”