

Taking Steps To Preserve Mexican Dance

By Kimberly Chun

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

In the heart of San Mateo County, the dance troupe Raices de Mexico keeps traditional Mexican dance alive and kicking — and stepping and swirling.

Company leader Matias Varela rededicated himself to the work after he traveled to Mexico City last year in search of artifacts and materials for Day of the Dead performances. He realized that the tradition the troupe tries to sustain is disappearing from its country of origin. Stores that had sold images of Aztec gods and books on the history of Day of the Dead stocked Halloween costumes, Frankenstein masks and plastic pumpkins.

"My wife and I were sort of blown out," says Varela, 49, of East Palo Alto. "The irony of the whole thing is we went to the flea market in San Jose and they had more stuff on Dia de los Muertos than we found in Mexico City."

"We're the only real representation of Mexican culture in San Mateo County that I know of."

MARIA ELENA
VARELA
General director
OF RAICES DE
MEXICO

Varela is on the board of directors of the 18-year-old Raices de Mexico, the sole nonprofit Mexican regional dance company in San Mateo County. The East Palo Alto group will perform a retrospective of dances from eight

regions in Mexico tomorrow at Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts.

Varela says the troupe is something of a family affair. He and his wife, Maria Elena, and their three daughters, Monique, Jacqueline and Nicole, have danced for the company. Maria Elena, 50, a Palo Alto native, also volunteers her time doing administrative work as the troupe's general director. Her brother, ethnomusicologist Javier Pacheco, will perform with his group, Trio Pacheco, at the Mountain View show.

"The kids get up in the morning sometimes and they go, 'What time is practice?'" says Matias Varela, who was born in Guadalajara, Mexico, and grew up in Hayward. "It really astonishes me the responsibility that this kind of art form instills in children, the discipline, self-esteem and responsibility."

Ruben Avelar, an East Palo Alto activist and an original member of San Jose's folklorico troupe Los Lupenos, started Raices de Mexico after he graduated with a political science degree from University of California at Berkeley, returned to his hometown and began searching for a community activity for

Troupe Inspires Pride in Dancers

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Latino youth.

"I liked it because I saw a lot of young Latinos with nothing to do and low self-esteem. When they left the troupe they had character and confidence and were outgoing," says Avelar, who initially called the troupe Grupo Juvenil and ended up teaching teenagers and then younger children four nights a week in the early years.

"It had an effect on the community, too. A troupe like Raices makes people see there's more to East Palo Alto than 'murder capital of the country,'" he says.

Getting Started

The Varelas got involved in Raices de Mexico in 1984 when daughter Monique wanted to start dancing. After befriending Avelar and learning he had been paying group's expenses out of his own pocket, they helped the company get non-profit status. They formed a 10-member board that includes Todd Gaviglio, principal of John Gill Elementary in Redwood City, and cultivated the troupe of about 30 adults and 10 children.

Raices de Mexico produces its shows, remixes music at a studio in Menlo Park, arranges lighting and makes backdrops. Teacher Inez Perez choreographs the performances, and former dancer, seamstress and board member Columba Castenada helps members create costumes.

Raices de Mexico has performed more than 500 times, says Matias Varela. Shows have included civic functions such as the inauguration of East Palo Alto and venues such as the Fox Theater in Redwood City, St. Anthony's Church in Redwood

SHOW SCHEDULE

Raices de Mexico's "A Journey Through Mexico IV" features the ensemble, Danza Xitlalli dance company, singer Fito Herrera, Trio Pacheco with Carlos Castellanos and rope trickster Adrian Franco. The performance is at 8 p.m. tomorrow at Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St., Mountain View. Tickets are \$12-\$15. Call (650) 903-6565.

City, Menlo-Atherton High School in Atherton and for the past two years the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival.

The large Latino population in East Palo Alto, Redwood City, San Mateo and South San Francisco supports the company's work, says Matias, but he sees the faces in Raices de Mexico's audience as not necessarily those in La Raza.

"It's usually second- and third-generation parents that want to instill the cultural heritage back into their children. Recent immigrants don't want to hear about it," says Matias Varela, who is also the executive director of the Arts Council of San Mateo County.

Perseverance Pays Off

Susan Cashion, coordinator of the Dance Division at Stanford University and founder of Los Lupenos, says she believes the Varelas have given the troupe a consistency and repertoire that similar student dance groups at Stanford, the College of San Mateo or Cañada College don't have.

"The Varelas have just really per-



TRADITION: Raices de Mexico, an East Palo Alto traditional dance troupe, has performed more than 500 times in its 18 years.

severed and kept the group going and have done wonderful magical things with them," she says. "It's the strength and conviction of these two people that have really centered the group and allowed them to continue. I'm just so impressed with their work."

After almost two decades, Maria Elena Varela sometimes finds it hard to believe she's still so active in the troupe.

"I don't know," she mutters. "Maybe I'm crazy. I feel like if I just stop, unless there's a strong person to take up the slack, it's going to die. We're the only real representation of Mexican culture in San Mateo County that I know of."

Matias Varela pictures Raices having a home of its own — a Mexican cultural center somewhere on the Peninsula.

It's a way of firmly putting down roots in a county full of small, struggling dance companies.

He counts off Peruvian, Portuguese, American Indian and Tongan ensembles, including a Filipino dance company that Raices will join for a Day of the Dead and Todos los Santos (All Saints Day) celebration in Daly City in November.

"There's a lot of dance in San Mateo County," he says. "That's my work to help them develop because if we don't support groups like that, they're going to be lost."