

A Billingham International Folklore Festival of World Dance media item:

Folklore Festival proves a real community favourite

The 52nd Billingham International Folklore Festival of World Dance was this year all about firsts with a number of exclusive premieres and special events that proved a massive hit with local people and audiences.

Festival organisers confidently forecast that thousands of people have engaged with the Festival including the 'Parade of Nations', education workshops, ticketed and free events.

BIFF 2016 programmed events in locations across the town, Borough and Tees Valley with shows at the Billingham Festival Arena, Billingham Forum Theatre, Middlesbrough Theatre and Billingham Leisure Centre. The Festival even took the dancers to four local care homes to put on some special performances. They visited Stockton Lodge Care Home, Sheraton Care Home, Kirkdale nursing home and Allison House, both located in Thornaby.

On the opening day Billingham Town Centre was crammed to the rafters with hundreds of local residents and visitors welcoming the international dance companies to the Festival from as far afield as Chile, Martinique, Mexico, North Cyprus, Russia and South Korea.

Over the course of the week-long event people were treated to a variety of showcases that embraced the international spirit. The Festival was blessed with some consecutive days of baking summer weather that bathed the Festival Arena in beautiful conditions.

The landmark events included: a sell-out performance of 'Synchronised' – a music, Indian dancing and synchronised swimming spectacular by Balbir Singh Dance Company at Billingham Forum Swimming Pool. Over 350 spectators crammed poolside to watch a showcase that had only been seen in a handful of venues up and down the land including London's Southbank Centre after it being commissioned originally for the London 2012 Olympic Games; and being inspired by the Hollywood water musicals of Busby Berkeley.

Then there was the premiere of "Interrupted Souls" by Newcastle-based Eliot Smith Company at the Forum Theatre that was choreographed by Lorenzo Pagano, who is a current soloist dancer for The Martha Graham Dance Company. This formed part of one of two World Gala showcase events to hit the stage of the Forum Theatre where in total just under 500 people experienced both concerts.

The Festival also honoured its reputation of educating and nurturing the dance talent of the future with the daily Uncle BIFF Children's and the International Youth Dance workshops, which were busy each day with over 600 young people attending in total.

BIFF presented exclusive workshops at Macmillan Dance Academy in Middlesbrough with Bolivian dancer Yuvel Soria as seven students choreographed a brand new 5-minute piece entitled "Encounters"; and a South American themed series of visits were made to Billingham South Community Primary School engaging with the school's 475 pupils with some inspiring Brazilian Samba moves being the order of the day.

The Festival also auditioned professional dancers from inside and outside of the region from Newcastle to Sunderland and Washington to North Yorkshire. They worked alongside company-in-residence Balbir Singh Dance Company for "Synchronised", "Painting the Indian Gods" (a special arts and dance based project in the atrium of Forum Leisure Centre) that included live art and Indian

Kathak dancing; and a specially commissioned piece to mark the unveiling of a new bronze sculpture entitled “World United by Dance” by Mexican artist, Carmen Avalos.

They even gave a unique opportunity for three young apprentice dancers to share the spotlight, absorb the atmosphere and learn from the priceless dance experience given by sharing the same stage as other dancers from across the world – who use different types of dance techniques, styles and skills.

The beauty of the Internet has meant that people all over the world have been able to watch and enjoy the Festival through video clips and web-casts. For example, 50 Facebook videos showing footage from the Festival have amassed an impressive 44,000 views from avid dance observers from across the globe. One of the Tweets was even retweeted by the Mexican Embassy representing the importance and stature the Festival holds.

The Festival even attracted people like Steve and Galina Wardrop, who travelled all of the way from Sydney in Australia and primary school teacher, Eriko Nakamura who came over from Hyōgo Prefecture near Osaka in Japan to volunteer during the festival. She returned to Billingham in memory of her late-husband Stewart Tulip - who loved the Festival as he grew up in the town.

Joe Maloney, Director of the Billingham International Folklore Festival of World Dance, said: “Year-upon-year the Folklore Festival helps to reignite the regional heritage that builds on over fifty years of local tradition. We have seen some old faces returning but these are coupled with some new audience members, young and old, who came along to enjoy dancing from across the varied nationals.

“The Festival still has a warm connection with the people of Billingham, and this was represented with the opening parade that saw residents pack the town centre with their cheers and smiles. We would like to thank all of the support that we’ve received by arts funders, local businesses and local people – who all came together to make our North East event something that is admired by dance lovers far and wide.”

Catherine Devlin, aged 56, who works as a customer service assistant at a local post office, said: “The Folklore Festival is absolutely great for the town! The street parade brings wonderful memories flooding back from the height of my childhood, when I used to love countries like Spain, Mexico and Hungary coming to Billingham and creating a real party atmosphere. There’s something about the Folklore Festival that makes the whole place come alive.”

People can look back on this year’s Billingham International Folklore Festival of World Dance by visiting our website and social media pages www.billinghamfestival.co.uk [Facebook] [facebook.com/billinghamworlddancefestival](https://www.facebook.com/billinghamworlddancefestival) and on Twitter [@BillFest](https://twitter.com/BillFest).

Here’s to 2017!
#makingmemories

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Media Contact: Garry Smith
Strictly Press (on behalf of BIFF 2016)
07899 910823 / strictlypress@yahoo.co.uk