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Tamejavi festival mixes it up on the cultural front

By Don Mayhew
The Fresno Bee
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Heard this one? A Hmong guy and a Mexican woman walk into a bar. Three hours later, they walk out with the Tamejavi festival.

The Tommy-what?

This weekend's debut festival in the Tower District is a cross-cultural exchange of music, theater, poetry, film, art, comedy, food, dance and storytelling. The word "Tamejavi" itself is a combination of three words (Hmong, Spanish and Mixteco) that roughly means "cultural harvest market."

Highlights include Hmong rapper-comedian Tou Ger Xiong delivering his hopeful message, the tricultural musical play "Promise of a Love Song" and the Agustin Lira-directed "Esperanza y Luz."

In between, there will be workshops and music on two outdoor stages in the parking lot behind the Tower Theatre. The event will kick off with a reception at 6 p.m. today at the theater.

All festival events are free. (A complete schedule is available online at www.citizenship.net.)

The idea behind the festival didn't actually take shape in a bar. Organizers say it was a logical outgrowth of the efforts of the Central Valley Partnership's Civic Action Network.

But they talk so excitedly about festival plans that, though struggle is sure to be a common thread in many of the performances this weekend, it's clear the pervasive mood is likely to be one of celebration.

Pai Yang, who recruited Hmong performers for the festival, says it presents a great opportunity to learn how diversity strengthens community.

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"In Fresno, we have so many diverse ethnic groups and cultures," Yang says. "There's very little chance you could get to know each culture or group. This is a chance to build bridges and learn from others."

Yang says if there's anything the performers, filmmakers and artists have in common, it's the experience of trying to assimilate into the United States, overcome language barriers and contribute to the well-being of the community while retaining their cultural identities.

Xiong, who performs at 1 p.m. Saturday, is a perfect example. He lives in Minnesota now and travels across the nation, talking and joking about his experiences as an immigrant.

"He does it in English and Hmong -- Hmonglish," Yang says. "It's good for the community. He will make you laugh. And cry."

The Tower Theatre's Leslie Davis thinks the event will make a nice departure from the straightforward concerts the facility has presented the past couple of years. And you can't beat the message.

"I think we need more world peace than we have today," Davis says, "and we get there through understanding one another."

Details are available at the Web site or the theater, 485-9050.

Belly dancers, too!

It may not rival the Tamejavi Festival for cultural diversity, but Bev's all-ages show tonight at the Starline is sure to have an idiosyncratic moment or two.

The Fresno rock band will headline a show that also features the orchestral pop of 2 A.M. Orchestra, Milk for the Morning Cake and the Tanjora Bellydancers. The show is scheduled for 8:30 p.m. Admission is \$6. Details: www.starline1.com or 485-7517.

Cowboy time

Country singer-songwriter Phil Vassar, who has penned hits for Alan Jackson, Jo Dee Messina, Collin Raye and Tim McGraw, will cap the first day of the Clovis Rodeo with a performance at 8 p.m. today.

Vassar's self-titled debut has sold more than 500,000 copies since its release in 2000, and he's putting the final touches on his second album, due in August. Tickets cost \$10. Details: 299-5203.

Country music also takes over Warnors Theater at 8 p.m. Saturday, when Sawyer Brown celebrates 20 years together. The band rocketed to fame after winning a Star Search competition, then defied the odds by evolving beyond its early bubblegum-country sound to score hits

throughout the '90s.

Tickets for Sawyer Brown's show cost \$30-\$35. They're available at the Warnors box office or www.tickets.com. Details: 264-6863.

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