In 2008, both the Georgia House of Representatives and the Georgia State Senate passed resolutions designating the Azalea International Folk Fair as Georgia’s official international festival. I was thus very excited to be invited by Ms. Serena Huang, the driving force behind this extremely successful event, to join its panel of esteemed judges for the 4th Annual World Culture Folk Dance Competition.

This year, the panel of judges included Ms. Caroline Hoadley from Walhalla, South Carolina, Professor Eric Nielsen of Valdosta State University, Mr. Julius Horvath from Daytona Beach, Florida, Ms. Kristia Kaufman of Valdosta, and myself from Tallahassee, FL. All of the judges had significant performance and teaching credentials, across a range of dance traditions, from classical ballet to modern, tap, jazz dance, acrobatics, gymnastics, ballroom, folk and international dances.

My duties as a judge began on Friday night, March 6, where, under the guidance of Mrs. Judith Joseph, Dr. Derald Jones, and Dr. Isik Denizman, I met the other judges, and discussed the various procedures and criteria involved in judging the various entries. This was an important meeting, as not only the honor of being recognized for excellence in folk dance was involved, but also significant cash prizes, with a total of $2,700 being awarded.

The 2009 competition has three divisions, grouped according to age ranges, and to the number of people involved per entry. There were nine entries in the “Youth Team” Division (aged 14 and under); there were 10 entries under the “Adult Team-Small Group” Division (from 15 years old upwards, and with only one to three dancers per group); and there were 12 entries for the “Adult Team-Large Group” Division (from 15 years old and up, with four or more dancers).

The competition certainly lived up to its reputation in terms of global diversity. Countries and regions represented include Hawaii, India, Scotland, Ireland, Nigeria, the Philippines, Thailand, Brazil, Malaysia, Egypt, Cuba, Korea, Indonesia, U.S.A., Sicily, West Africa, the Middle East and Bavaria. The costumes could be very simple and yet capture a crucial element of the folk culture being depicted, as in the case of the Ibo Youth Group of Atlanta, who danced the “Atilogu,” using black leotards and strips of genuine Nigerian fabric; or be quite ornate, with faux gold headaddresses and finely embroidered fabric, such as those used by the Malaysian Association of Georgia, who performed the “Dance of Love,” or the Sanggar Lestari Indonesia, who danced the “Pembubung.” Participants came from all over Georgia and Florida to compete, and I could feel the energetic buzz in the air, as soon as I stepped into the magnificent and spacious Valdosta-Lowndes County James Rainwater Conference Center the next day, Saturday, March 7.

I knew it would be tricky to judge, across so many variables, and so many traditions, but I thought that the guidelines prepared for the panel of judges were sound. First, all dance presentations had to be under 5-6 minutes (with prior approval required for those exceeding five minutes), or there would be a two point deduction from the total score. Second, each of the following categories carried 20% of the total mark: choreography (how difficult and diverse were the movements and lines produced); projection (whether the dancers created a powerful rapport with the audience through facial expressions, eye contact, and the general energy and enthusiasm they conveyed); execution of movement (whether the dancers created a powerful rapport with the audience through facial expressions, eye contact, and the general energy and enthusiasm they conveyed); execution of movement (whether the dancers created a powerful rapport with the audience through facial expressions, eye contact, and the general energy and enthusiasm they conveyed); technical skills (which, for the groups, entailed how synchronized they were with each other; for soloists, this was about how controlled and poised they were); and overall impression (whether they had
Dance Judge), Dr. Caroline ‘Kay’ Picart (Dance Judge)

Mr. Julius Horvath (Dance Judge), Ms. Caroline Hoadley

The Glas Tara Dance Group (Ireland) winning third place; and the sister-team, Christiana Liedle (Scotland) won first place, with their striking and precision. What I enjoyed most about the female Liedle duo was their synchrony of their partnering, and the precision of their footwork.

For the Adult Team-Small Group Division, the Dhun Sae Institute Atlanta worked the crowd, to win third place, with its powerful drums, and two traditional hats, from which a ribbon was hung, and with which intricate head movements, could be done, alongside some powerful leaps. Kahu Ahi (Polynesian) captured second place, with the women’s colorful and authentic costumes, their sinuous and synchronized movements, and their relaxed and lovely smiles. But the Liedle Brothers: Stefan, Francis and Jacob (Scotland) won first place, with their striking “The Argyle Broad Sword Dance,” combining masculine and military bearing with grace and precision.

For the Adult-Large Group Division, it was a clear fight between two groups: the Philippine Performing Arts Company of Tampa Bay that won the dance of The New Highland representing Scotland. They won fourth place with the Schwinger Tanz, representing Bavaria, which moved across marching military postures, softer and more graceful elements, and a some group lifts, in which two young women were lifted off their feet, as the group soared in a circle.

But it was ultimately the Philippine Performing Arts Company of Tampa that won two prizes: third place, for their charming rendition of “Aray” (a dance that depicts the Spanish influence on the northern parts of the Philippines and is a courtship dance), and first place, for their breathtakingly spectacular “Singkil” (a dance of the south in the Philippines, which depicts its proud Moslem heritage, combining the story of royalty with love and battle, and using long bamboo poles, beat in rhythm to traditional drums and gongs).

The AIFF is indeed a festival to track, as it continues to grow and evolve. I look forward, with anticipation, to 2010’s version. Many thanks to Ms. Serena Huang, the panel of judges, and the AIFF Board, for their hospitality and kindness to me and to my husband Jerry, while we visited with them.