

Choreographer Ron De Jesus pays tribute to his mentor with Ensemble Español premiere work

By HEDY WEISS Theater Critic June 17, 2014 1:43PM

ENSEMBLE ESPANOL's / 'FLAMENCO PASSION'

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 3 p.m. Sunday

Where: North Shore Center for the Performing Arts, 9501 N. Skokie Blvd., Skokie

Tickets: \$26-\$46 / Info: (847) 673-6300; / northshorecenter.org



Julia Hinojosa and Juan Castellon and EE Company Dancers in Mil Clavos section 3 Fuego Negro / Black Fire. Photo by Dean Paul.

Chicago's Ensemble Español is one of this city's most remarkable, if too often hidden treasures. And it is far more than a dance company. Just ask anyone who has caught its grand-scale "Flamenco Passion" programs featuring a troupe of 40 performers — resident dancers, singers, instrumentalists and guest artists who are masters of Spanish dance culture (classical, folkloric, flamenco, contemporary dance-theater), and who also showcase the music traditions of Spain, from the Renaissance through the 21st century.

Over the course of nearly four decades, Dame Libby Komaiko, the Chicago-bred dancer, choreographer and teacher who founded the company, and who serves as its artistic director along with associate Irma Suarez Ruiz, has created an internationally recognized center of the arts in residence at Northeastern Illinois University. And the company's annual performances at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts, which cap its monthlong, multifaceted American Spanish Music and Dance Festival, earn standing ovations.

This year's performances, June 20-22, will include four world premieres and two U.S. premieres. Among the debuts will be "Mil Calvos" ("A Thousand Nails"), a three-movement Spanish contemporary ballet choreographed by Ron De Jesus as an homage to Komaiko, the woman who mentored and inspired him when he was a dropout from Roberto Clemente High School.

A child of the 1970s, De Jesus, now 51, was one of nine children in a family with Puerto Rican and Russian roots, and with a mother who suffered from undiagnosed mental illness.

Initially, there were no formal dance lessons, but as De Jesus recalls: “I grew up in a Hispanic neighborhood where everybody was dancing, and I often escaped by watching Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly movies on TV, and becoming saturated with their style and musicality. Also, every day at Clemente, from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., our study period took the form of a daytime disco with a live DJ, and we would do break dancing and the hustle, and have competitions that diverted our energy in a good way. But I was rebellious and floundering, and eventually dropped out of school.”

“When a girl I was dating enrolled at Northeastern Illinois, I followed her and sat in on Libby’s classes,” De Jesus said. “Libby eventually challenged me to take classes, made me get my GED, got me a scholarship, and helped me get my life together.”

De Jesus went on to study and perform with the Joseph Holmes Dance Theatre and the Chicago Repertory Dance Ensemble, and then spent 17 years as a member of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. He left Hubbard Street to dance in the original cast of the Twyla Tharp/Billy Joel musical, “Movin’ Out,” and subsequently was part of the creative team for Tharp’s Broadway production of the Frank Sinatra-scored show, “Come Fly With Me.”

Shuttling between Chicago and New York these days, De Jesus had discussed creating a piece with Ensemble Espanol for three years. Then, on very short notice, he had to come up with an idea for a grant the company was about to submit.

“I don’t like those kinds of deadlines,” De Jesus confessed. “But it sent me back to thinking about the days when I was a naive, uneducated adolescent and I first saw Libby. Accompanied by her mom, a pianist, she was rehearsing ‘Danse Orientale,’ playing the castanets, and dancing with incredible delicacy. And I thought about how moving it was to see the bloodlines of those two artists, and the beauty of their bond. So I was on to something.”

“Mil Clavos,” whose title refers to the nails hammered into the heels and tips of flamenco shoes (as opposed to tap shoes’ metal plates), ultimately grew into a 17-minute piece.

“The first section of the dance [“Pasaje Nuevo”] is a passage out of blackness that suggests the masculine aspect of flamenco, with all its thrust and power,” explained De Jesus. “The women flourish in the second section [“La Paloma Roja” or “The Red Dove”], with flamenco dresses suspended like chandeliers. The final section [“Fuego Negro” or “Black Fire”], builds gradually to a big, chaotic crescendo that echoes Libby’s signature piece, ‘Bolero,’ and shows off the full company.

“My goal was to marry the traditional and the contemporary, and to introduce more partnering and lifts and intricate floor rolls that have not been part of the company’s vocabulary, and I think the dancers have been surprised by their own capabilities.”

The “Flamenco Passion” program also will have plenty of treats for traditionalists, with dances celebrating the styles and music of the many and varied regions of Spain.

Joining the company will be guest dancers, choreographers and musicians, including the always sensational Carmela Greco, daughter of the legendary Jose Greco. In tandem with Suarez, Greco will debut “Marismena” (“Herbaceous”), a duet evoking the flamenco style of Cadiz. She also will perform a world premiere solo, “Faroleando” (“Bullfighting”), a Cuban-influenced dance in the Guajiras flamenco style that portrays a brave bullfighter as she rapidly twirls her “bata de cola,” the long, ruffled train dress that resembles the toreador’s cape. And the program also will include a reprise of Suarez’s 2013 work, “Rendición” (“Surrender”), a contemporary flamenco drama depicting the passions of everlasting love.

Another world premiere will be danced by Gala Vivancos (former prima ballerina of the National Ballet of Spain), in her self-choreographed “Andaluza,” a suggestion of the Spanish classical style of the 1900s, set to the music of the great Spanish composer, Enrique Granados.

Note: Ensemble Espanol will reprise “Mil Clavos” at the Dance for Life benefit at the Auditorium Theatre on Aug. 16. The company also will be performing at the prestigious Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival in Massachusetts this summer.

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