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The stunning variety of Spanish dance with Ensemble Espanol at the Touhill

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The first Dance St. Louis program of the year was a stunner.

The artistry and athleticism of the Ensemble Español Spanish Dance Theater lit up the Touhill Performing Arts Center this weekend with an exhilarating and colorful evening of Spanish Regional, Classical, and Flamenco music and dance. Think of it as a Spanish “Riverdance” but farther from Las Vegas and closer to its roots.

Currently in residence at Northeastern Illinois University at Chicago, Ensemble Español describes its mission as “the preservation, presentation and promotion of the classical, folkloric, flamenco, and contemporary traditions of Spain.” That mission was accomplished in spectacular fashion this weekend with a full program (two and one-half hours with intermission) that captured the variety, vigor, and (especially) the sensuality of Spanish dance. Spontaneous applause was common, along with standing ovations.

The night began with the exuberant and flashy “El Baile de Luis Alonso” by the full company, followed by “El Albaicín” (music by Albéniz, from Book 3 of “Iberia”), a seductive duet by guest artists Palome Gómez and Christian Lozano. Seduction then took a dark turn in the tragically charged “Amor Eterno (Petenera)”, in which live flamenco musicians joined company

Associate Artistic Director Irma Suárez Ruíz and First Dancer Jorge Pérez in a *pas de deux* that, according to the program notes, “is rarely performed due to the superstitions that surround *La Petenera*. Is she love or is she death?” Either way, it was riveting.

Two remarkable solos were next. First, Mr. Lozano returned, along with the live musicians, for an astonishing display of flamenco technique that was frequently interrupted by applause. It was the kind of performance that made me wonder if flamenco shouldn’t be considered as an Olympic-level sport as well as an art form. Then Ms. Gómez took the stage for the elegant “Ruinas”, dedicated to company founder Dame Libby Komaiko. The first half of the program concluded with the entire company displaying a variety of dance styles in “Ecos de España”, inspired by the “Black Period” paintings of Goya (several of which were projected on the screen upstage to set the scene) and accompanied by the final two sections of Rimski-Korsakov’s “Capriccio Español”.

Various styles of flamenco (mostly with live musicians) informed the the second half of the program, beginning with the full company in “Alegrias y Jaleos”, followed by “Anhelos del Alma” (“Longing of the Soul”), with Claudia Pizarro, Crystal Ruiz, and Olivia Serrano performing their own choreography — a neat combination of staccato taps and sinuous grace. Each of the three brought her own unique personality to the dance — a marked contrast from the kind of uniformity you usually encounter in classical ballet troupes.

Next, the men of the company were featured in the bravado of “Una Obra de Arte” (“A Work of Art”), followed by a return of Mr. Lozano and Ms. Gómez in their own creation, the elegiac “Zorongo Gitano”.

The evening concluded with what has apparently become a signature piece for the company, a dazzling realization of Ravel’s “Boléro” accompanied by projected images of drawings and paintings by Picasso.

It begins with small, fluid arm and shoulder movement from the women of the company, decked out in bright red low-backed dresses and seated on the floor, facing away from the audience. The movement passes from one dancer to the next in a kind of choreographic canon. As the music progresses, they rise and are joined by other company members as the piece slowly builds to its well-known conclusion. By the end, the stage has become a riot of color and movement, with flashing toreador capes to accent Ravel's one and only key change.

It was simply jaw-dropping. I have complained before about how willing local audiences are to leap to their feet, but this time it was completely appropriate. Thanks to Dance St. Louis for bringing this remarkable, tremendously talented company to our city. Let’s hope this will be only the first of many visits.

Dance St. Louis’s season continues with the national tour of the recent revival of “West Side Story” at the Fox February 14 through 16. Their next presentation at the Touhill is the Joffrey Ballet on March 9 and 10. For more information, you may visit dancestlouis.org.