

[Dance](#) 09/30/2016, 08:27pm

Ensemble Español celebrates 40th anniversary in fiery form



Ensemble Espanol in "Iroko" at the Auditorium Theatre. (Photo: Dean Paul)

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There is simply no other way to describe it: Ensemble Español Spanish Dance Theater set the Auditorium Theatre on fire Thursday night as it celebrated the conclusion of its 40th anniversary season with a concert that not only drove a packed house to its feet, but left those experiencing the Chicago-based company for the first time with a sense of exhilarating discovery.

The concert – the initial entry in this season’s Made in Chicago Dance Series at the Auditorium – came on the heels of the company’s recent triumphant tour of Spain, as well as at the very moment it announced a challenge grant from the Caerus Foundation, Inc. that has the potential of raising \$1.5 million through a matching campaign over the next three years. (The grant will enable the company, in residence at Northeastern Illinois University, to further expand its programming and educational outreach, and to begin the important transition to a dance company with full-time dancers and administrative personnel, and permanent part-time staff.)

Watching the company – an ensemble of extraordinarily beautiful, passionate, superbly skillful dancers backed by the sort set, lighting and costume design found only among the grandest ballet companies – you would never guess it was not already “full-time,” although such is often the case in the dance world. Yet whatever the finances involved might be, all those involved in Ensemble Español – including its founder, Dame Libby Komaiko, its artistic director, Irma Suarez Ruiz, and its executive director, Jorge Perez – are already operating at the very top of their game.



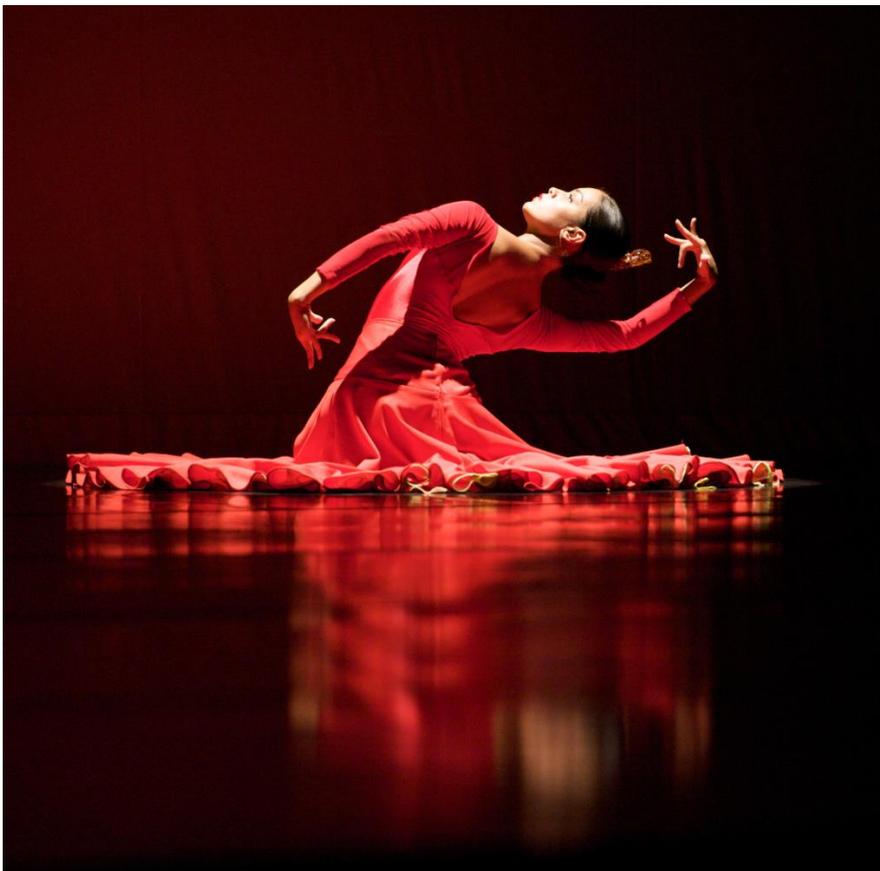
Ensemble Espanol in Ron De Jesus’ “Mil Clavos” (“One Thousand Nails”) at the Auditorium Theatre. (Photo: Dean Paul)

Each piece on Thursday’s program was superb, but it was the brilliantly arranged juxtaposition of the works, including several interludes of live music, that sealed

the deal – illustrating the fact that while this company is deeply rooted in the art of flamenco, it moves far beyond that singular technique to explore classical, folkloric and contemporary styles, and invariably injects everything it does with great theatrical flair.

Take, for example, the opening work, “Mil Clavos” (“One Thousand Nails”), a propulsive, sexually charged “flamenco ballet” in three movements, choreographed by Ron De Jesus and featuring starkly dramatic lighting by Nathan Tomlinson, and costumes by De Jesus and Ruiz. Set to music by Ezio Bosso, Valteri Kujala, and Ludovico Einaudi, it sets out defining moves for the men (with their ramrod backs) and women (with their beautifully arched upper bodies and circling hips), and injects a ferocity into every encounter between them. De Jesus has blended the percussive elements of flamenco with liquid lyricism and virtuosic moves, and the dancers execute it all with heat and elegance. Talk about getting things off to a red hot start.

In “Duende Gitana” (“Gypsy Soul”), Suarez demonstrated how women (and not necessarily young ones) often rule in flamenco, as her powerful percussive footwork blended with the percussion work of seven outstanding onstage musicians led by Kassandra Kocoshis. Suarez returned in the second half of the program with a knockout solo performance of the world premiere “Mi Deseo” (“My Desire”), choreographed by Carlos Rodriguez. And indeed, she made desire palpable, earning a standing ovation in the process.



Ensemble Espanol dancer Monica Saucedo in Dame Libby Komaiko’s “Bolero” at the Auditorium Theatre. (Photo: Dean Paul)

The two intensely controlled but ferociously competitive women in “Deshojando Flores” (“Stripping Petals”) also suggested female power. Choreographed and performed to stunning effect by Olivia Serrano and Crystal Ruiz (dressed in elegant equestrian-style outfits), the piece turned flamenco footwork into a language of power games.

A very different form of dancing animated the two works that concluded the first half of the concert. In “El Baile de Luis Alonso” (“The Dance of Luis Alonso”), choreographed by Ruiz, and set to the music of Geronimo Gimenez, the stage opened to reveal a backdrop suggesting a ballroom with lushly costumed couples dancing as they might have in Spain’s form of light opera known as “zarzuela.” Then came “Alma de Aragon” (“Soul of Aragon”), with the company buoyantly flying around the stage as if on springs in a peasant dance that also involved the golden tenor of Luis Antonio Galvez-Alcantara.

Opening the second half of the program was “Iroko,” another virtuosic piece for the full ensemble choreographed by Carlos Rodriguez and Angel Rojas, and set to a magical score by Juan Parrilla. Named after an African tree, the work evokes “the many roots and branches of Spanish dance” and moves from a primal beginning (with reaching arms reminiscent of the opening to Alvin Ailey’s “Revelations”), to the most sophisticated modern spins on flamenco.

The work was followed by another instrumental segment featuring flamenco singer Patricia Ortega, guitarist David Chiriboga and Kocoshis, and was followed by Jose Barrios’ “Algazara” (“Jubilation”), which included a brief but beguiling appearance by Ensemble Español’s youth company.

Of course no Ensemble Español performance would be complete without Komaiko’s masterwork, “Bolero,” one of the most striking interpretations of the familiar Ravel score you will ever see. Danced against projections of Picasso paintings, it begins with a canon for five women in red dresses who unfurl slowly and suggestively (their backs to the audience) from their positions on the floor. It then expands gradually, just as the music does, to include the full company, with a grand flourish of fans and capes as the full orchestra reaches its climax. Irresistible.

<http://chicago.suntimes.com/entertainment/ensemble-espanol-celebrates-40th-anniversary-in-fiery-form/>