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'Flamenco Passion' showcases Spain's love-filled artform



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Dame Libby Komaiko, who founded Ensemble Español at Northeastern Illinois University in 1975, must be proud of the house that love built. Her own profession of love — "Tiempos de Goya" (1990), devoted to the history and culture of Spain — opened the 39th annual "Flamenco Passion" showcase for the company and guest artists Friday and Saturday at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts in Skokie.

Flamenco dance and music are easy to love. At their best, they're so deeply connected as to be indistinguishable; a kind of alchemy also bonds performers and audience. Intimate, spontaneous, intuitive: the art of flamenco feels like surfing, everyone riding a series of waves that swell, crest and subside over and over.

When Spanish dance is performed to recorded music, as it was in the first half of "Flamenco Passion," the set nature of the experience precludes that synergy. Fortunately, the second act — when an onstage singer, cajon player and two guitarists accompanied all five dances — came alive again. Hallelujah.

Longtime Ensemble dancer Irma Suarez Ruiz, who'll begin taking over the role of artistic director from Dame Libby in the coming year, dominated the second half, first in her 2008 "No Me Olvides" ("Do Not Forget Me"), a full-company Andalusian dance in the quick, defined alegrías family. A simple, elegant structure agreeably distinguished music and dance here, while her 2010 solo "Duende Gitana" intermingled palmas (hand-clapping), percussion, stamping and song.

Guest artists Carmela Greco and Jose Greco II, children of Jose Greco, danced their 1986 duet "Cancion Andaluza," which revealed flamenco's potential for nuance: approach and retreat, light touch, a quick smile. In this context, Carmela's sudden feint at her brother felt like a thunderclap.



Jose Greco II and Carmela Greco perform "Cancion Andaluza," part of the "Flamenco Passion" showcase in Skokie. (Photo by Dean Paul, HANDOUT)

The sounds and movements of Spain mingled at the Flamenco Passion showcase.

A striking fandango — "Vivencias," choreographed and performed by Ensemble dancers Claudia Pizarro and Jose Torres — was galvanized by their intensity, use of castanets and marvelous stagecraft, including Pizarro's play with the long, trailing skirt of her dress. Carmela Greco's 2010 full-company "Anda Jaleo," choreographed with the dancers, proved a rousing closer, even bringing out the musicians to dance and creating a warm, genuine sense of family.

The first act's highlight was Jose Greco's expertly performed new solo. Based on his father's "Zapateado," it's called "Danza del Contrabandista" ("Dance of the Smuggler") — perhaps an allusion to Greco's appropriation, or the way his father imported flamenco to the U.S.

Also in the first half: Determined smiles and twisting "seductive" poses marred guest artist Raquel Gomez's new solo, "Danza de la Gitana," choreographed by her sister Paloma. Raquel Gomez's new full-company "Sur," set to recorded jazzy music by David Dorantes, was likewise rather empty dramatic.

Laura Molzahn is a freelance critic.