

EVOKING SPAIN THROUGH DANCE: THE AUTHENTICITY OF ENSEMBLE ESPANOL AND THE ROYAL BALLET'S FLAMBOYANT "DON QUIXOTE"

HEDY WEISS on June 23, 2015

Two dramatically different dance performances – both rooted in Spanish culture – were on display on Chicago area stages this past weekend. And they offered an intriguing comparison study in the ways a particular cultural heritage can be celebrated. They also were full of magnificent dancing.....



A scene from Dame Libby Komaiko's "Tiempos de Goya," performed by Chicago's Ensemble Espanol. (Photo: Joe Davis)

.....Meanwhile, on stage at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts was Chicago's Ensemble Espanol Dance Theater, and its fervently performed, ideally paced program was a knockout. In fact, the company has never been more thrilling than it was in this "Flamenco Passion" showcase.

There was bravura dancing aplenty – from the most artful and authentic flamenco, to beautifully theatricalized folkloric and classical choreography. The dancers (and both the men and women in the company possess exceptional beauty, individuality and pristinely polished technique and synchrony) also happen to be superb actors. And they bring a blazing sense of drama to everything they do. This is a company that fully deserves its growing international reputation.

The program's opening work, "Tiempos de Goya," is artistic director Dame Libby Komaiko's remarkable four-part exploration of the many subjects and moods dealt with by painter Francisco Goya. It is an astonishing chronicle of life – from its pleasures and sensuality to its most nightmarish violence.

A painter with the instincts of a hedonist-turned-social commentator and front line journalist, Goya captured the idyllic life of aristocrats at play, but he also conjured the most horrific, pitch black visions of war in all its grotesqueness. Komaiko's piece, stunning at every turn, brought these scenes of savagery and torture to vivid life, with a notably remarkable sequence in which the women hauled wrapped corpses across the stage.

Fiercely danced by the full company – an ensemble of great diversity and impressive discipline – Komaiko's choreography, which uses a slew of different dance styles, was enhanced by projections of Goya's iconic paintings and etchings, and the use of music by Granados, Boccherini, Ginastera, Beethoven and a traditional lullaby. Goya's ever-darkening vision of life felt all too timely in this work that brings to mind Kurt Jooss' masterwork, "The Green Table." And there could be no greater compliment than that.

The rest of the wonderfully mood-shifting program was on the same level, with the suave and fiery Jose Greco II, and his sister, Carmela Greco, in both a remarkable duet as well as solo turns; with a fierce solo by Raquel Gomez, who also choreographed "Sur" ("South"), a most impressive group work for the company; with a ferocious duet, "Viviencias" ("Experiences") choreographed and brilliantly performed by the stunning Claudia Pizarro and Jose Torres. And there was more, often embellished by terrific live musicians, as well as a treasure trove of costumes, and superb sets and lighting.

All in all, two very different evocations of Spain. And the "tourists" on both voyages could not possibly have been disappointed.