



Ensemble Español: Tradition and Innovation At Forty

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Spanish dance, unlike its counterparts in other concert dance genres, is like fine wine that only improves with age. At forty, Ensemble Español proves the point.

Flamenco, Spain's most distinctive dance form, requires ripening and experience of its dancers far beyond proficient execution to cultivate its demanding depth of expression and technical mastery. Its most legendary performers are noted for their longevity, giving their best well into their sixties and even seventies. (Iconic Flamenco dancer José Greco, father of frequent Ensemble Español guest artist Carmela Greco, performed until the age of seventy-seven.)

Happily, in an age that worships the cult of youth, Ensemble Español's "Flamenco Passion" enthralled cheering audiences with a fitting demonstration of that maturity in celebration of the company's fortieth anniversary season this past weekend at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts.

Beyond the flash and panache of technical lightning bolts, the subtle language of Flamenco capitalizes on the inner workings of the human psyche, its currency being the minute alterations

of alignment in the upper spine, and its radiating energy in mesmerizing articulations of the head, arms, and hands. All the while the audible engine of the feet stokes the fire of passion in the upper body's furnace, building to a boiling point of musical excitement and rhythmic complexity. High drama in a tightly-contained spatial universe.

Maturity in both programming and performance was in abundant evidence, with a vibrant mix of Spanish classical, folkloric, and Flamenco traditions, and a world premiere that entwined more contemporary choreographic innovations with those traditions.

Performers ranged from the very young--the charming Youth Company joining their professional counterparts in two folkloric pieces--to the most mature--artistic director Irma Suárez Ruiz and guest artists Paloma Gómez, Carmela Greco, Angel Rojas, and Carlos Rodriguez, each of whom danced solo works. The corps Ensemble itself spans a refreshing mix of age, background, and experience, coming together in polished professionalism and ensemble precision.

It was revelatory to trace a progression of style and artistry through the ranks of lovely Ensemble dancers in the large group pieces to the most mature expression of the art form in the solo numbers, which punctuated the evening with rich texture that kept the audience riveted throughout a long program. A superb ensemble of guitarists, percussionists and singers, highlighted the varied program with their artistry.



Where the ballet-infused full-company “La Boda de Luis Alonso” (2012), choreographed by Paloma Gómez, soars and sails, Flamenco simmers and seethes in Irma Suárez Ruiz’s solo “Duende Gitana” (Gypsy Soul, 2010). The first piece integrates folk elements with fans, castanets, and flirty kicks, while the second percolates a mix of hand clapping, drumming, Paco Fonta’s soulful voice, and Suárez Ruiz’s own accelerating foot rhythms. Her marvelous hands wove a drama of interlocking rhythms between her foot percussion and the accompanying musicians.

Angel Rojas’ snapping fingers and body percussion, employed a riveting economy of gesture in his Flamenco solo “Ausencia, Gris, Farruca” (Absence, Grey, Farruca, 2012) to create a multi-layered, sultry intensity. In seeming dialogue with singer Fonta, his hair-trigger temperament and rapid staccato heel action contributed to a character portrait of a man in conflict with himself.

A slow, pensive beginning burst into a fiery Flamenco dance in Paloma Gómez’s moving tribute to Dame Libby Komaiko, “Memorias del Corazon” (world premiere). Her expansive breadth of movement unleashed the intense energy of Flamenco in her own unique extrapolation of the idiom.

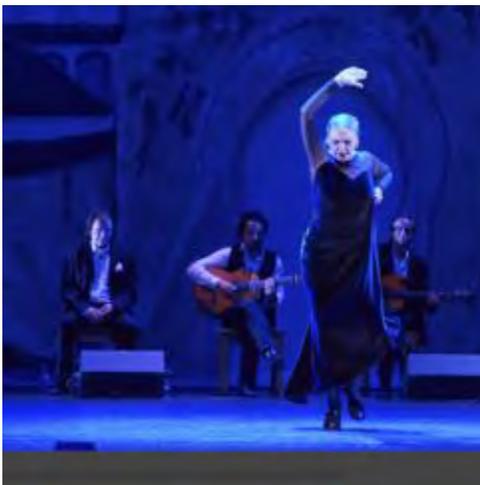
Closing Act I was a world premiere, “Iroko,” created for the company by the choreographic team of guest artists Carlos Rodriguez and Angel Rojas. In a nod to both contemporary ballet and Lord of The Dance, the piece made dramatic use of the ensemble in sculptural configurations highlighted by Luis Perdigueros’s theatrical lighting. Set to a score by Manuel Parilla, the piece

began in the scratchy dissonance of violin, inspiring an abstraction of form that veered some distance from its native roots in Flamenco. As the music and movement evolved, however, an experiment in melding the familiar sounds and movement of Flamenco with modern forms infused the innovative form with the traditional, pioneering an intriguing new direction for Flamenco on the contemporary dance stage.



Two solos dominated Act II. Carlos Rodriguez’s hybrid “Errante” (2015) used a sheet of metal to define both sound and movement in a virtuoso solo performed by the choreographer to Paco Cruz’s modern percussion and electronic score.

Carmela Greco’s entire body sang in her solo tour de force, “Cinco Tiempos Para Amar” (Five Times To Love, 2010) in a stunningly poignant journey of the soul, performed to the music of guest Flamenco guitarist, Antonio Gabarri Jimenez. Unusual foot rhythms and her long grey hair flowed with the movement of her enormous fringed shawl. The shawl embodied lovers, morphed into wings, adorned her as a gown, comforted her as a blanket, and became, ultimately, an extension of her body. This extraordinary dancer’s performance left the audience breathless.



Closing the program was Dame Libby Komaiko’s signature full-company piece, “Bolero,” set to the music of Maurice Ravel, a rousing finish to an exceptionally enjoyable evening.

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