

Flamenco Fever

The smoldering dance reflects our hunger to feel powerful emotions

By Ann Murphy

Last fall I went to see flamenco and Spanish dance at the tiny Eureka Theatre on Jackson, where a hint of stale popcorn still haunts the air from its days as a movie house. As the concert began, melancholy guitar chords and dissonant, plaintive song rang out into the near dark. A drummer beat a wooden box, and as the stage lights rose, the sound of rhythmic footwork began offstage amid shouts of "Olé!" Accompanied by spare, complex music, a compact woman emerged and started to dance. The movement gathered force, like embers catching fire, and within five minutes she had ignited the house. Her dancing was eloquent, furious, and demanding, and her imperfect body had a knowing sensuality that only someone who has lived and suffered could communicate. The crowd cheered wildly.



Part Diva, Part Bullfighter: Yaelisa displays her embroidered mantón, used for enhancing flamenco rather than enticing bulls.

During intermission, still smoldering, I slipped up to the table where a Spanish man was selling beautiful silk shawls with 10-inch fringe, like the ones the dancers flourished onstage. I grabbed a large, black square with magnificent embroidered flowers and imagined myself flicking it around me as I turned, clicking high heels -- part diva, part toreador. Although I don't own heels, at that moment it didn't matter. I thought: I *could* own them. I turned to the seller and asked him to keep the *mantón* for me until I had enough money to pay him. Three weeks later it arrived by mail. I'd been seized by flamenco fever.

Fortunately, I'm not alone. This weekend, flamenco hits the Bay Area like a firestorm, hotly anticipated by the growing numbers of aficionados in the region. The long-awaited flamenco "festival" -- really just one splashy night, sponsored by Cal Performances in its yearlong celebration of Latin culture -- stars two dancers new to the area and performing on tour together for the first time: Juana Amaya and Farruquito (Juan Manuel Fernandez). Farruquito is a sizzling young flamenco magician of 20, whose *flamenco puro* is being heralded by critics like the *New York Times*' Anna Kisselgoff as "nothing less than sensational." Sandwiching Saturday's performance are two concerts by local flamenco diva Yaelisa and her troupe Caminos Flamencos, which performs Friday in Berkeley in a Valentine's Day homage to Spain and on Sunday in the troupe's intimate monthly "Cafe Flamenco" at ODC Theater. After decades of brainy, abstract movement and dance divorced from music, and at a moment of historical uncertainty, flamenco seems to reflect our hunger to know what we feel.

Yaelisa (who does not reveal her last name) -- tall, willowy, with long, lovely arms and a shock of black hair pulled back off her face -- is the daughter of a flamenco dancer. As a girl she studied with Rosa Montoya in San Francisco and later with the renowned Ciro in Spain. She performs regularly, runs a serious Flamenco Festival in Southern California each August, and teaches masses of students around the Bay Area. Classes these days, she says, are always full. Last week at the San Francisco Dance Center on Seventh Street, dozens of her intermediate students thundered out rhythms with their flamenco shoes, arms coiling like elegant tendrils in front of their bodies, flounced skirts moving in waves.

"What flamenco does," Yaelisa explains the next day, "is it allows people to make up the story as they see it and get something from the emotion and expressiveness onstage. They feel like they're a part of something. Maybe because we're in an era when people need to feel powerful emotion, they're drawn to flamenco."

Yaelisa is an exponent of *flamenco puro* -- Gypsy flamenco, the same brand that Farruquito and Amaya perform in their concert, billed as an evening of *por derecho*, or straight-ahead, unadulterated flamenco. This isn't sleek Spanish dance replete with fans and mantillas, but dance that seems to burn the practitioner with hidden fire. As an art form, it originated with the Gypsies of Spain, who arrived on the Iberian Peninsula from India in the 15th century. Influenced by their encounters with other cultures and limited by their extreme poverty, Gypsies developed an art based on songs and body rhythms. As historian Mona Molarsky explains, they were too poor for instruments. Today the dance is still driven by *el cante*, the song, and because it's the art of a people who've been outcast, *duende*, what we'd call soul, is as vital to it as it is to jazz or blues. What's more, because for centuries bullfighting and flamenco were the only two areas in which Gypsies were allowed to succeed, according to historian Meira Goldberg, the dance is informed by the gestures of the toreador in the ring, and its foot rhythms often echo the thunder of charging bulls.

At root flamenco is also an improvisational form, like Indian *kathak* dance, and is driven by the singer, who can choose verses from among an array of standard lines. As the singer makes choices, the dancer has to shift the movement spontaneously. This uncertainty gives the form its air of daring mastery and hint of danger. But as flamenco expands to ever larger halls like Zellerbach, says Yaelisa, artists feel they must set their shows in advance. "In the last five to 10

years, there's very little *puro* left," she laments. "The artists are insecure because they're playing in bigger and bigger venues."

Yaelisa herself has to balance "mounting" her shows and keeping them open. In her cafe setting (at ODC) or on the postage stamp-size stage in a restaurant where she competes with crashing china, improvisation is vital. "I leave tons of room for my number to have tons of improvisation. It leaves me more space for the singer," she explains. But in big shows, she says, even she prearranges numbers for her dancers. "When you're working in an ensemble, you have to set your material."

Still, flamenco is about more than a struggle with improvisation or a debate about artistic purity. It demands the depiction of a full range of qualities we call masculine and feminine. In the '40s and '50s, the great dancer Carmen Amaya (no relation to Juana) performed the lively *allegrias* (a joyful dance) in pants, adding percussive brilliance and jumps as no woman before her had done. In flamenco today, women can be as tough as toreadors. "I think there's a lot of duality in the women's role. It's very masculine and feminine," Yaelisa says. "In Spain, women still have to watch what they say, but onstage they are free." To get there you'll need a *mantón*, some black flamenco shoes, a flounced skirt, and a whole lot of soul.

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Ann Murphy is a dance critic in Berkeley, California. Her new blog writingdance can be found here: <http://www.writingdance.blogspot.com/>