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**REVIEW: The Sephardic Connection, Story of the Spanish Jews**



*Alborada Spanish Dance Theatre, presented by the Monroe Township Cultural Arts Commission, Sunday, September 17, 2006 at the Richard P. Marasco Center for the Performing Arts, Monroe Township, New Jersey*

Eva Lucena, Executive and Artistic Director, Principal Dancer, Choreographer  
Chavela, Asst. Dir., Principal Dancer, Choreographer, Singer

Dancers:

Lisa Botalico, Giselle Revollar, Yloy Ibarra, Dancer  
Adela de Principe, Evita Alegria, Claudia Morena, Maria Rodríguez, Elena Reyes,,  
Cristina Cardenas, Caterina Carrasco, Karina Grace, Ami Otero, Julissa Cadenillas-  
Ramos

Musicians:

Carlos Revollar, Music Director and Principal Guitarist Jose Ramon Ramos, Guitarist,  
Dominico Caro, David Castellano, Singers, Peter Basil Bogdanos, Percussion

Guest Artists: The NOGA Group, The Daughters of Sophia Tribal Dance Troupe, Ramzi El Edlibi, Laurie Fechter

Eva Lucena deserves a standing ovation for even thinking up this project, The Sephardic Connection. Let me preface that by saying that this remarkable woman tackled a subject which not too many individuals, especially in flamenco, care to touch. That there is a connection in flamenco, there absolutely is, and it is found in the music i.e., Peteneras, in the letras (lyrics), and in the melodious cantoral scales of the cante. That 500+ years after the fact, Sephardic Jews still have a voice, even though they may not have much success getting anyone to listen? Ms. Lucena did.

To paraphrase from the program, a tientos:

*Neither the Jews nor Moors decided to enact the law that was inhuman and devastating in 1499, it was Ferdinand & Isabella!*

This was a point by point demonstration of the Sephardic Jews' departure from Spain, through Mediterranean regions and through migration to Turkey, with historically accurate depictions of the music, dance, song and period costumes. The production opened in Cordoba, 1492, and as Laurie Fechter sang a haunting rendition of the Sephardic song "Cuando el Rei Nimrod" at the opening of the show, accompanied by the NOGA Group, she and the musicians set the tone of the evening, ancient sounds coming from an ancient peoples. This is the phrase that kept going on over and over in my head. Readers, can you tell yet? Viewing this performance for me was personal. Laurie shared with me that as a Spanish language major, she was drawn to Ladino (a combination of Hebrew and Spanish spoken by the Spanish Jews) because she understood the language, although she is of Northern European Jewish (Ashkenazi) background. She was drawn to the Ladino music as well, becoming enamored of it because of its ancient sounds, and having heard Sephardic songs at her synagogue.

The set was simple, yet quite effective. The entire stage was transformed into a plaza, with a water fountain set stage right of center in the Cordoba of Al-Andalus, or Andalucía, as it is better known. Stucco'ed white-washed walls with an occasional terracotta-tiled shaded window contrasted nicely with the water fountain that was set with Moroccan/Moorish tile work. The musical bubbling of this fountain was heard throughout all of the production, a perfect backdrop to the setting of the people groups of Andalucía as they gathered: native Spaniards, Gypsies, Sephardim and even some local harem girls from the Sultan's palace.

The company moved in a smooth progression from palo to palo, beginning with a light-hearted Bulerías, danced by members of the Company and guest student dancers, moving on through Adio, sung beautifully by Nick Mandoukos of the NOGA Group. What is particular to Sephardic music is the sound of longing, a sound of uprooting. I was taken pleasantly by surprise when the Daughters of Sophia Tribal Dance Troupe danced in with water jugs on their shoulders and demonstrated Sephardic Jewish steps. There are neck movements, isolated upper torso lifts, shoulder shimmies, to name a few, very much a nod to the Muslim countries that Sephardim moved through. Ashtar told me how she invited a group of Sephardic friends from the Ukraine to her home, and over a dinner of pizza, asked them to show her their distinctive moves. She then combined them with her Middle Eastern dance expertise and the choreography for this number was born. There was such a feast for the eyes, beautiful colors swirling throughout the scenery, nothing is ever static while on stage. There is spoken narration at the beginning of some numbers, about the history of the Sephardim, and two phrases stuck out: "the Jewish voice has been extinguished in Spain" and "Flamenco is our voice of protest". The Alborada Spanish Dance Theatre is known for their theatricality. That means, expect theatre, dancing on a greater scale, a story line running throughout, keeping you riveted until the end.

There was even a celebration of a bris, the ritual of circumcision of a male child on the 8th day of his birth, according to Jewish tradition. This was a perfect backdrop to a Nana, a lullaby by Manuel De Falla, sung by Lisa Botalico in a stunning lavender bata de cola dress, with a lace mantilla head covering while she held and stilled the fussing child. This mantilla was worn by the judías (Jewish women) in Spain, and still worn by many women in synagogues today, in the same style. Ms. Botalico dances with all the pride of new motherhood, kicking her bata out of the way as she executes her footwork. In the Caña that followed, she began showing signs of the beginning expulsion from Spain, as she would hold the train of dress close to her, as if in pain. Yloy Ybarra danced a masterly Farruca, my first time seeing him do this style. I have had the pleasure of reviewing Yloy for other dance companies, and he never has danced the same thing twice. He danced the Farruca “with a growl”, which I highly enjoyed. Most dancers don’t utter a peep; this man interacts with the musicians and makes an effort to connect visually with the audience. That’s flamenco to me. There is nothing like hearing the satisfying thud of feet hitting the ground powerfully in perfect compás. This is Mr. Ibarra’s style. He was dancing in the role of the proud papá of the newly born. All this time, La Petenera (Eva Lucena), was watching the proceedings, nodding in approval, holding her community together with a touch here and there, but dressed in black and matching black manton, a preview of things to come. There was a bittersweet look to her face, enjoying whatever life was left and still lived in Spain, albeit with a wizened and determined face, looking into the horizon uncertain of what was to come.

I take this moment to concentrate on the cantaores, Dominico Caro and David Castellano. If only you could have heard the powerful vocals of each cantaor, the rich and thick beauty of the letra chronicling the historical record of this era. Ms. Lucena shared with me the many hours of research Dominico put into the letra heard at this performance. Mr. Caro was only 14 years old when he took a trip to Spain, and instead of continuing on to study in college, he became an aficionado of flamenco, being tutored in the tradition by legends such as Diego del Gastor, Antonio Mairena, Fosforito and Fernanda de Utrera. He spent that first summer in Morón de la Frontera, living amongst the Gypsies in Moron and Jerez, accompanying guitarists in dance classes and has never looked back. I believe this whole production will be put on DVD, we will post this information as soon as we have it.

The pivotal moment of this production was Peteneras, a palo attributed to the Sephardic Jews, and not performed by many, as the superstitious amongst the singers and musicians refuse to touch this subject. It was visually arresting, to say the least. La Petenera and her attendants, Chavela and Maria Rodriguez as well as the dancers from the Alborada Spanish Dance Group, all whom tended to Eva Lucena. They used their shawls as a shroud for her, covering and uncovering. Each movement was languidly stunning yet painful to watch, and rang true to the storyline. The whole community was in mourning, but none more so than La Petenera, the Matriarch. It is for her that the jaleo (calling out during a performance) “Señora!!!” is used. So regal, so dignified, a menacing, muffled anger rising ever so slowly against the society that has done this to her people. Here is where she bursts, one of her mocitas (young maidens) runs to her and drops on the floor, hugging La Petenera by the knees. I was moved to tears. The letra “mi neshama y mi

ventura esta en tu poder” translated says, “my soul and my life are in Your hands”. The concept of community in the Jewish tradition is very, very deep. Your whole life is based on the people you see at synagogue, the yeshiva, the kosher establishment where you buy the food for your family; the candlestick maker that prepares your candles for the weekly Shabbat. This is what Eva Lucena transmitted. A righteous anger at what happened to a people ripped from their land.

After the intermission, the curtains opened to reveal the Dardanelles in the Turkey of 1499. If this article serves its purposes, it will cause you, the reader, to go to the nearest Google or Wikipedia screen and research what has been written here. The Ein Keilloheino (another Sephardic song in Ladino) was sung by Laurie Fechter. It really puts things in perspective when you hear these types of songs sung out of the context of a synagogue. There was a beautiful moment of recognition between Chavela and Eva Lucena. Following that, a Seguiriya danced with authority by Chavela and playing castanets, sharp staccato trills, calling out to La Petenera with her dance; yet she (Ms. Lucena) becomes increasingly agitated and bitter, refusing to be comforted. Time marched on, and the Sephardim picked up yet another musical remnant. The NOGA Group rendered another piece, this time from Salonica. This could easily be music from the inside of a palace. The mood lightened for a bit as Giselle Revollar and Ramzi Edlibi danced to Tangos de Oliva, an original composition by Carlos Revollar, with Peter Basil on percussion. The story behind this goes as follows: he worked about a year ago with Yoel Ben-Simhon of the Sultana Ensemble, and Yoel got to talking about his grandfather, who was an olive seller. It turns out that this grandfather lived on a mountain filled with olive trees, and was a very wise man. Carlos and Jose Ramos put the music together and Ms. Lucena was able to get a grant for this performance based upon the idea and song. Teaming up Giselle and Ramzi brought the audience much enjoyment through the interplay and flirting that ensued. There is something so earthy about the pair – Giselle is very “flamenquita”, with her hip scarves and coins dangling, and Ramzi looks like he took time off whatever caravan he was working with and came to dance with one of the very saucy local girls. She can seamlessly switch from hip movements, belly dance style, to the footwork distinct to Tangos. Ramzi brought out that Egyptian folk feel. There is so much going on in this production it is hard to decide what to write about first!! You can check out Carlos and Giselle on Wednesday nights at Mompou, 77 Ferry Street, in Newark, New Jersey; Thursdays at Euro Lounge, North Arligton, New Jersey. In October, they’ll be at Spain Inn in Piscataway, New Jersey as well as in Spain II Inn in Asbury, New Jersey, check out [www.spaininn.net](http://www.spaininn.net) for their performing schedule. Carlos’ official website is [www.flamenconyc.com](http://www.flamenconyc.com).

There was another piece which premiered at this show, Mizerlou, a blend of Jewish and Greek music, and everyone involved in the company wore an original Turkish-style pant with a vest designed by Claire Spring. Line after line of dancers brought a tribal flavor to this piece. That’s the problem for me. I’d like to see this again and again. It has been an utmost privilege to be at the beginning of a production that has been added to the Alborada repertoire. Yloy Ybarra once again, brought it home in the Solea por Bulerias, heavy and thick with aire de Sevilla. He is in the fifth season at the Thalia Theatre in Woodside, New York with his company Ballet Fiesta Mexicana and works with many

public school systems, exposing children to the world of dance theatre. As if he's not busy enough. He also shared with me that he craves the yearly trips to Sevilla, to participate in the Festival de Rocio, to see the foliage of the region, to experience the aire and the people, that is his injection and flamenco is his raison d'etre. Flamenco feeds him, it centers him. Make me a plate of that, I say.

In the Fin de Fiesta for Bulerías, everyone got in the mix. All I saw was one community, whooping it up, and that they enjoyed this journey. There is such a sense of real convergence, a true kinship between all members, crew and otherwise of the Alborada Spanish Dance Theatre. Each wears many hats, but all work joyously. Did you know that Alborada has their own CD? It's called Musical Tapas, with Revmenco and Tangos de Oliva which are original compositions by Carlos Revollar. It's a good introduction for those who don't know flamenco. They can be purchased by writing Alborada Spanish Dance Theatre, 55 Piersoll Road, Old Bridge, New Jersey, 08857, telephone number 732.255.4071, email is [:alboradadance@aol.com](mailto:alboradadance@aol.com)

Their website is [www.alboradadance.org](http://www.alboradadance.org).

### Entrevista with Eva Lucena



FB: How long have you been developing this project?

EL: This has been in my blood. My Jewish background stems from my grandmother's side, they are Cohen, [Editor's note: this means they are priests, and allowed to approach the altar where the Torah is kept]. They were Russian Jews, and on my father's side, the family is from Valencia and Granada.

The first time I went to Toledo, I sensed a surreally deep connection to the land, and totally knew every street was. My husband and friends thought I definitely had lost it. I knew all of the streets except the new part of Toledo. This project has been about 15 years in the making, and much brooding has been done over the development of the show. Lisa Botalico's husband, Joel Rudin, who plays the viola in many of our classical and folkloric productions, is Jewish, and had major input in all of the developmental stages. I bond with Lisa Botalico chemically and emotionally. The young and the old on stage make the public go crazy!! Flamenco is for all generations.

FB: What kind of research did you do for this show?

EL: Let me start by telling the story of the Sephardic Jews, I knew their story needed to be told. They are, after all a forgotten part of history. If you remember, the Jewish people were the intellectuals, map makers, poets, etc. A great light went out of Spain when the Jewish people left. Spain regressed to the Middle Ages, when the Catholic Regime came into supreme control... The country of Turkey received most of the people, and they prospered in that land. I began to explore other musical productions, bringing in tango,

for example, all the while with this project was constantly in the background of my mind. Also, I brought Mexican dance, as another cross-cultural offering. Other cross cultural projects dealt with India and Egypt, and all in how they pertain and spread their influence to flamenco. The Celtic Connection with the bagpipes and the drums, tugged at my heart. I am deeply connected to each project we put together at Alborada.

I had to pursue the Sephardic past, causing me to become quite emotional. This concert broke everything inside of me. Now-- some of my dancers are busy researching their past to see if they might have Sephardic blood!!! I spoke to Domenico (Caro), Lisa (Botalico), Giselle (Revollar), my company members, and I knew that this family, we could put this together!!! We were building on the way, a journey, to achieve something more, to get something more. Many people thanked me, crying on me, at the first performance of The Sephardic Connection. This project has changed so many things within me and in my company.

*Ole tu arte, Señora...*

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