

# Out & About

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## • ABOUT DANCE •

# Passion and intensity

## Alborada troupe presents celebration of culture, history, music and movement

By SHEILA ABRAMS  
DANCE CRITIC

The visceral passion and intensity of flamenco dance was at the heart of the unusual program performed Sunday, Sept. 17 by Highland Park-based Alborada Spanish Dance Theatre at the Richard P. Marasco Center for the Performing Arts in Monroe Township. There was a lot of flamenco but, surprisingly, it was being used as part of a program with a wider scope. The performance, titled "The Sephardic Connection: The Story of the Spanish Jews," was more about history than dance programs usually are.

The company, which has been performing and operating a school for the past 12 years, explored the tragic and ultimately triumphant history of the Sephardim, whose presence on the Iberian peninsula is dated back at least to the second century B.C. When the Romans first landed in Spain, Jews were already settled there. Suffering greatly at the hands of the Inquisition, however, they were expelled as a group in 1492 by Ferdinand and Isabella, the very same monarchs who underwrote Columbus's explorations.

Beginning with the fact that Spain, over several hundred years, had absorbed the art, music and dance of Jews, Arabs and Gypsies and incorporated them into its own cultural identity, the program sought to explore the influence of these groups, and particularly the Jews, on the music and dance of Spain.

Such an exploration is a massive and ambitious undertaking, and what Alborada was also try-

ing to do was entertain an audience. The result was less scholarly than it could have been but unquestionably more enjoyable for those who came to watch.

As the program began, an off-stage narrator related that the scene was Cordoba, a sunny day as days in Spain often are, but marred by a pervasive sadness. A singer, guest artist Laurie Fechter, sang a mournful Sephardic song. The company, bolstered by guest dancers from studios in Princeton and Edison, offered two ensemble flamenco dances.

There were soloists, including singers and musicians from Alborada's own group and from Noga, a trio specializing in Sephardic, Greek and Middle Eastern music. Also on hand was a trio of female dancers called the Daughters of Sophia Tribal Dance Troupe, who focus on Middle Eastern dance.

### Storytelling Dance

Some of the pieces told stories. Lisa Botalico, a principal dancer with Alborada, who is also a singer, offered a lullaby followed by a flamenco dance she choreographed telling of the suffering of the Sephardim. Another, danced by the ensemble and featuring artistic director Eva Lucena and another principal dancer, Chavela, told the story of a Jewish woman, La Petenera, who was left behind as the Jews were expelled because her husband was too ill to travel.

In the second half, the scene changed to the Dardanelles in Turkey, where most of the Sephardim landed. There was more of a Middle Eastern flavor, and the audience responded with sighs of recognition when a line of variously costumed women

danced Miserlou, the Greek-Jewish line dance beloved of folk dancers in this country.

The most prominent thing about flamenco as a dance form is that it is at least as much about attitude as it is about steps, postures and rhythms. Lucena said that flamenco evolved in the caves where the persecuted Jews were hidden by their allies, the Arabs and the Gypsies, also minorities persecuted by the church. Her description of it as music of protest is completely conceivable, with its insistent foot-stomping and defiant postures and expressions.

One brilliant solo was "Farruca," described as a "macho flamenco dance" offered by guest artist Yloy Ibarra. Ibarra does not look like a ballet dancer. His compact body is a powerhouse of expression, passion and rage.

All the soloists were exceptional in their own ways. Botalico projects an inner fire. Chavela is a masterful technician with a precise musicality and wonderfully expressive hands. Gisele Revollar, who shone in the second part of the program, has an exquisite arch to her back and beautiful carriage, and her dancing is imbued with an unmistakable sexuality. And Lucena is elegant and expressive, as much an actress as a dancer.

The company is varied in the ages of its dancers, their body types and even, surprisingly, their ethnicity. Some of the ensemble members are obviously less experienced and less self-assured than others. The Daughters of Sophia Tribal Dance Troupe appeared less rigorously trained than the Alborada dancers and their choreography would profit from



Lisa Botalico, principal dancer with Alborada Spanish Dance Theatre, choreographs, dances and sings with the Highland Park-based troupe.

more sophistication and intricacy.

The musicians, who sat on stage during the dancing, were outstanding instrumentalists and they also sang. We wish we could hear and understand the comments they occasionally shouted in Spanish during the dances.

Alborada has plans to perform this intriguing program in other

venues in the next several months and we heartily endorse it. The company also has a program called "The Celtic Connection," in which it explores links between Spanish and Celtic dance. We have not seen this but, if "The Sephardic Connection" is any indication, we hope we get the opportunity.