

Today's Spotlight

YOUR DAILY ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE

REVIEW

Tracing the steps of Jews in exile

DANCE

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Long after the fact, even the most sorrowful events may become the subject of romantic legends. Such is the story of the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492.

Alborada Spanish Dance Theatre of Highland Park has turned this human tragedy into an evening-length celebration of the Jewish heritage that survived — not only among the outcasts, known as Sephardim, but also veiled in the flamenco subculture that came to occupy the parts of southern Spain where the Jews once lived under Moorish rule. Alborada gave the second performance of its new work, "The Sephardic Connection: The Story of the Spanish Jews," on Sunday at the Richard P. Marasco Center for the Performing Arts in Monroe Township.

The piece recounts a sprawling epic, reflecting the grand ambitions of company director Eva Lucena. Lucena has created a series of multi-cultural revues that draw attention to flamenco's links with the greater world. In "The Sephardic Connection," Alborada's dancers and musicians share the stage with the Daughters of Sophia Tribal Dance Troupe, Arabic folk dancer Ramzi El Edlibi, the Levantine musicians of the Noga Group, and soprano Laurie Fechter, who introduces each half of the program with a plaintive Sephardic melody. Lucena's students fill in as "extras," and the bustling scene in a Spanish plaza, where flowerpots adorn stucco walls and a fountain spurts above Moorish tiles, fairly pulses with activity.

Given the complicated logistics of bringing all these costumed individuals together, perhaps it is not surprising that the show looks under-rehearsed, especially in the "Mizerlou," where the Alborada ensemble is called upon to perform the unfamiliar steps of a Greek folk dance. Sunday's event also suffered from mishaps with the lighting and sound systems. Voice-overs in which Lucena describes the



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The Alborada Spanish Dance Theatre of Highland Park performs "The Sephardic Connection: The Story of the Spanish Jews" at the Richard P. Marasco Center in Monroe Township.

Sephardim's burdens seem unnecessarily histrionic, although the grief of exile from their homeland and the pain of social ostracism are what bring the Sephardim closest to flamencos.

The concept of "The Sephardic Connection" remains sound and intriguing, however, and the show has several episodes offering great excitement. The survival of something as apparently frail and defenseless as a song or a dance — in spite of centuries and violent events that alter the world map — always seems marvelous. So to hear the pure tones of the Spanish Renaissance in Fechter's voice, as she sings "Cuando el Rei Nimrod" or "Ein Keilloheino" in a mix of Hebrew and Ladino, is very gratifying, if in sharp contrast to the hoarse-throated flamenco style.

Led by Ashtar (Julie Nuzzo), the three Daughters of Sophia subtly articulate the Near Eastern dances they perform, maintaining close ties with the rhythm that

they augment with ululating cries. Feet skip and shoulders jiggle to a fast tempo, while the dancers' hips may swing around in a broad, slow circle that sends a spiral of movement upward through the body.

In their opening "Bulerias," the Alborada Spanish dancers hint at the sensuality and defiance that characterize flamenco, even in a festive number. Soloists focus these emotions in various ways. Wildness is the calling card of the flamboyant, loose-limbed Lisa Botalico. Both Yloy Ibarra and Gisele Revollar are more contained, with Ibarra drawing sudden flashes of energy out of a brooding stillness in his "Farruca," and Revollar unfurling long, seductive phrases in "Tientos."

Lucena herself appears as a statuesque figure, posed at the center of a shrouded tableau that dramatizes the fate of the Sephardic heroine La Petenera, or clutched in a welcoming embrace as La Petenera reunites with her people abroad.