

## Flamenco flashback

### Spanish troupe Noche Flamenca tells centuries-old tales in superb performance

Tuesday, December 05, 2006

By Chris Waddington

To find the wellsprings of flamenco, one usually travels to the back-street cafes and gypsy gatherings of southern Spain. On Friday, the wellspring overflowed at Tulane's Dixon Hall as the New Orleans Ballet Association presented Noche Flamenca -- a troupe of three singers, three dancers and two guitarists dedicated to preserving this centuries-old art form.

While others seek to update flamenco with Vegas-style stage shows and elaborate choreography, this Madrid troupe cultivates "duende" -- the ecstatic release of passions -- through structured improvisations between musicians and dancers. At the heart of Noche Flamenca's performances are song lyrics that date back five centuries, to a time when gypsies, Jews and moors suffered a medieval version of ethnic cleansing during the Spanish Inquisition.

No translations were required on Friday, however. The words may have been unfamiliar, but the sorrows and joys came through in the raw, syncopated twanging of the guitars, in the bull-roars and interjections of the singers and in every stamped heel and matador swivel of Soledad Barrio, Juan Ogalla and Alejandro Granados. This was preservation with an extra kick.

Among the singers, Jose Anillo stood out. With the wild abandon of a free-jazz saxophonist, he unleashed melismatic vocal lines, plunging ahead of the beat, towing guitars and dancers in his wake. The farther he stretched, the greater the tension -- and sudden release -- as a hand clap or a ringing guitar chord brought everything back to the underlying twelve-beat.

The same pattern of tension-and-release came through in the dancing as slow-motion strutting yielded to sudden about-face spins, as arms held aloft dropped with the suddenness of a guillotine. Even in stillness, these dancers seemed charged with kinetic energy. A hulking Granados let one knee jiggle with the adrenaline-charge that precedes a street fight. Ogalla paused with a twisted torso, uncoiling to drive a staccato blur of heel and toe taps. Barrio tipped her pelvis and stared from under her brows, telegraphing a dance phrase that would carry her to the wings with angular movements.

Amid the general abandon, the dancers made the smallest gestures count. Granados summed up the delights of fraternity when he clapped a guitarist's shoulder to end a solo dance; all of male brutishness when he ran his hand up the bare arm of Barrio in their duet.

Barrio showed a similar range. In "La Plaza," she raised her arms with an undulant coiling movement that extended to her wrists and hands and fingers -- and seemed to invite erotic speculations. In "Solea" the same simple gesture became an emblem of despairing rage, with every joint bent at an angle, every movement swift and decisive.

The economy and expressive force of the dancers was matched by Ermanno Florio's starkly effective stage lighting. Would Juan Ogalla's brilliant solo turn as a paid mourner have worked half as well if he hadn't entered like a fighting cock lit by the glare of off-stage headlights?

Taken together, these elements made for a triumphant night of theater -- and something more. Noche Flamenca put everything at risk on Friday, and not just to "preserve" the old glories of flamenco. They were busy preserving hearts, souls, and the power of communal experience in a world of electronic flash.