

The New York Times

A Dancer's Flamenco in Intimate Quarters: Soledad Barrio and Noche Flamenca

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Published: June 7 2006

Soledad Barrio's *métier* is flamenco, and as the star of the Madrid-based troupe Noche Flamenca, she can make a believer out of the most jaded spectator. If you assume that flamenco is all phony histrionics, you've probably never seen Ms. Barrio in action. Her performances start with a quiet, silky grace, but by the end she is more creature than human.

Beginning tonight, Noche Flamenca, which was formed in 1993, returns to Theater 80, a superior setting for the intimate art of flamenco, in "Cielo de Tierra" ("Heaven of Earth"), a new show by the group's artistic director, Martín Santangelo, also Ms. Barrio's husband. The site is integral: this is their troupe's seventh appearance there. Theater 80 falls comfortably between an actual taverna and City Center, where flamenco is presented annually, and spectacle tends to overpower the spontaneous power of the art form.



Jack Vartoogian/FrontRowPhoto
Soledad Barrio in performance at City Center in February

"Theater 80 lends itself to what we're doing, which is flamenco in an unpretentious and real way — as real as we can get in a theater," Mr. Santangelo said on a recent visit to New York. "There's a kick to being in a gigantic theater with great amplification, but I always feel a little ratty afterward, because it's less about 'Let's meet' than 'We'll overwhelm you,' which is the easiest thing in the world to do with flamenco. I've always tried to divert the company from selling itself through tricks. Theater 80 is a profound place to do that, because we're literally next to the audience." Jack Vartoogian/FrontRowPhotos

Reviewing the company during the New York Flamenco Festival at City Center in February, Joan Acocella of *The New Yorker* praised Ms. Barrio's *siguiriya* (a particularly sorrowful dance in flamenco) as the greatest routine in the festival, saying she "seemed to take us through the whole history of human pain," Ms. Acocella wrote. "She groped, she paused, she dove, she came up for air, she dove again."

That Ms. Barrio, 40, succeeds in both large and small spaces is a testament to her raw, flinty presence. Still, she explained, with her husband acting as translator, performing so close to the audience in the 160-seat former art-film house is initially frightening.

"I really have to show who I am as a person; I can't hide behind anything," she said. "The audience hears you breathing and sees you sweat. It's a little bit violent. But after those first few minutes, you begin to really dive into what you're doing out of necessity."

In "Cielo de Tierra," which includes two other dancers and six musicians, Ms. Barrio will perform in at least three dances, including a duet with Alejandro Granados, whom Mr. Santangelo likens to the actor Anthony Quinn.

"I'm the director's wife, so I usually choose how many dances I perform," Ms. Barrio said with a laugh. "It depends on the show, but I usually do a group number, a duet and a solo. The show is spontaneous, but it's all structured and guided by Martín."

A native of Madrid, Ms. Barrio, whom Mr. Santangelo addresses simply as Sole (pronounced Sole-AY), didn't begin formal training until she was 18. "I started studying very late, but the only thing I remember about my childhood is that I wanted to dance," she said. After watching Carlos Saura's film "Blood Wedding," she signed up for classes.

"It wasn't easy to find a school because I didn't have a connection with the flamenco world," she said. "I went to different academies, but there weren't very good teachers." Eventually she discovered Amor de Dios, the Center for Flamenco Art and Spanish Dance in Madrid. "I was 100 percent clear that I loved it," Ms. Barrio recalled. "It was an obsession. Every hour I would dance until my muscles were shot. I started so late. Alejandro was born into a flamenco family. He was probably dancing before he walked."

With Mr. Granados, who has performed with the National Ballet of Spain and is a featured artist with Compañía Andaluza de Danza in Seville, Ms. Barrio says she feels safe to take more risks herself.

"The thing I love most about him is that he doesn't pretend to be someone else; he's trying to find himself in his dance," she said. "He knows that he can do certain things to make him look better, but he doesn't do that anymore. He really listens to the song and to the guitar. It's very flamenco, which means that the expression is more important than the form. For me, flamenco is about expressing what the song is. Your body has to be the throat of the singer."

Both Ms. Barrio and Mr. Santangelo say they regard the dance element of flamenco as an extension of the music. "I don't believe in group flamenco," Ms. Barrio said. "There can't be five dancers doing the same exact arm. It's great, but it becomes something else. Flamenco is personal. There are moments in our show when three dancers perform together, but it's each person dancing as an individual."

She met Mr. Santangelo, a New Yorker and a former dancer, in a dance studio in Madrid. "I looked at all the classes and opened one door, and I saw her and I thought, that's the one I want," he said. "I became best friends with her boyfriend for about a year and worked it." They now have two daughters, Gabriela, 11, and Stella, 5."

In general, Ms. Barrio, softer and more girlish than she appears onstage, is uncomfortable talking about dance; it's almost as if discussing her process might make the magic behind it disappear.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm a person who has a foot in this world and one foot in another world," Ms. Barrio said. "It's not as if I'm different onstage than I am in life. I am not two people. But when I dance, hopefully, the audience sees me for who I am. I know that with my technique I can express a certain amount, but another dimension comes into it. You really enter into that dimension when somebody onstage says, 'Olé!' All of a sudden, you turn, and you don't know where you are."

She smiled. "In that moment there is a fluidity with the singer and the music, and something happens that has never been rehearsed. That is real communication."