

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Dance with passion

'Forever Flamenco!' at the Fountain Theatre honors the classic style of intimate performing.

By LEWIS SEGAL
Times Staff Writer

For too long, a prejudice against intimacy has distorted some of the greatest dance idioms that ever expressed the soul of a culture. We seem to value dance only when it looks imposing, theatrical, with large casts spread across our biggest stages. When a performance represents a soloist's deep, subtle and almost private response to music, a text or personal demons, we think of it as a lesser experience.

What this prejudice has done to the art of tap, to ancient classical dance forms of India and to flamenco has often been discussed in these pages, along with the dancers and companies working to restore those arts to their proper scale. But flamenco has been especially fortunate in Southern California, for not only has



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UP CLOSE: Dancer Cristina Villalobos performs at the Fountain Theatre.



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SHOWCASE: Paloma Rios dances at the 80-seat Fountain Theatre in Hollywood.

'Forever Flamenco!' fans flames of artistic passion

a vibrant performing community developed in our midst but so have venues providing a close-up view of the ways that passion, dance technique and a throaty, improvisational singing style can fuse.

Since 1990, the Fountain Theatre in Hollywood has been a major center for flamenco expression, its 80 seats making it smaller than many of the caves and cafés in the Gypsy enclaves of Spain where the art began. The Gypsies were a nomadic people, and flamenco displays evidence of their travels in its Moorish and Arabic elements, just as it reflects the melancholy and defiance inspired by their being a despised underclass in Spain — outcasts in their own land.

To Debornh Lawlor, who has produced the Fountain flamenco events from the beginning (along with plays and other dance performances there), showcasing major artists on that stage has been one of her prime satisfactions, along with what she calls "that magic moment, that pulse of excitement when the audience is breathing with the performers." She laughs. "Of course, you miss that when it doesn't happen with the next show."

Lawlor and Ben Bradley currently produce the Fountain's "Forever Flamenco!" series on the first and third Sundays of every month, and last Sunday a five-member ensemble, mostly from Santa Barbara, performed to a packed house. Afterward, dancer Cristina Villalobos spoke of how the Fountain frees her to convey her feelings more directly. "I don't feel like I have to cover the stage end to end," she explained, "and I can improvise every step. I don't have to be a virtuos."

'Forever Flamenco!'

Where: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., Hollywood

When: 8 p.m. March 16 and the first and third Sunday of every month thereafter

Price: \$23 to \$30

Contact: (323) 663-1525 or www.fountaintheatre.com

She also doesn't have to compete with the distractions of the restaurants and bars where flamenco performances often take place elsewhere in the Southland — and in Spain. "People come to watch and hear the performance, not to party," she said. "There's a lot of connection going on."

Yaelisa, the Bay Area flamenco dancer and choreographer who serves as artistic director of the annual New World Flamenco Festival at the Irvine Barclay Theatre, believes that Southland flamenco has blossomed in the last decade — and that the Fountain has been a prime influence.

"There's a real love there for flamenco," she says. "It's a great showcase. I love to be there whenever I'm in Southern California — to work with my friends in L.A. on that stage."

Lawlor and Yaelisa agree that Southern California is especially fortunate in having widely respected flamenco singers readily available. They are often in short supply elsewhere, and flamenco just isn't authentic without them. (Singing, clapping and percussive footwork are the oldest, purest components of flamenco. Guitars and various forms of per-

cussion came later. Castanets? Don't even ask.)

When recalling her visits to Spain, Lawlor speaks in a hush about the flamenco societies, or *peñas*, where members pay to bring in a singer, and "it's very exciting to see that level of attention and passion about the music." In that regard, she's proud of such Fountain achievements as the performance in October that featured two important singers, Jesús Montoya and Vicente Griego.

Lawlor is no fan of flamenco dance dramas that include unison corps-dancing in formats borrowed from classical ballet and musical theater. "Flamenco basically is a solo dance form," she insists. "It's raw." But in one respect, "Forever Flamenco!" rejects direct, person-to-person communication in favor of a more grandiose, technologically processed mode of presentation: amplification.

You'd think that flamenco could remain unplugged in the intimacy of an 80-seat theater, but guitarist Robert Boyd — artistic director of the Santa Barbara contingent that appeared at the Fountain this week — says that he needs amplifiers to hear himself play and to overcome the clatter of the footwork and percussion. "I need the reverb," he says. "Otherwise the sound just dies."

Most every other guitarist at the Fountain also opts for amplifiers, and that choice can not only clutter the stage with hardware but also lead to assaultive sonics — a problem that ought to be addressed as the Fountain becomes ever more prominent in the development of flamenco in our community.

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