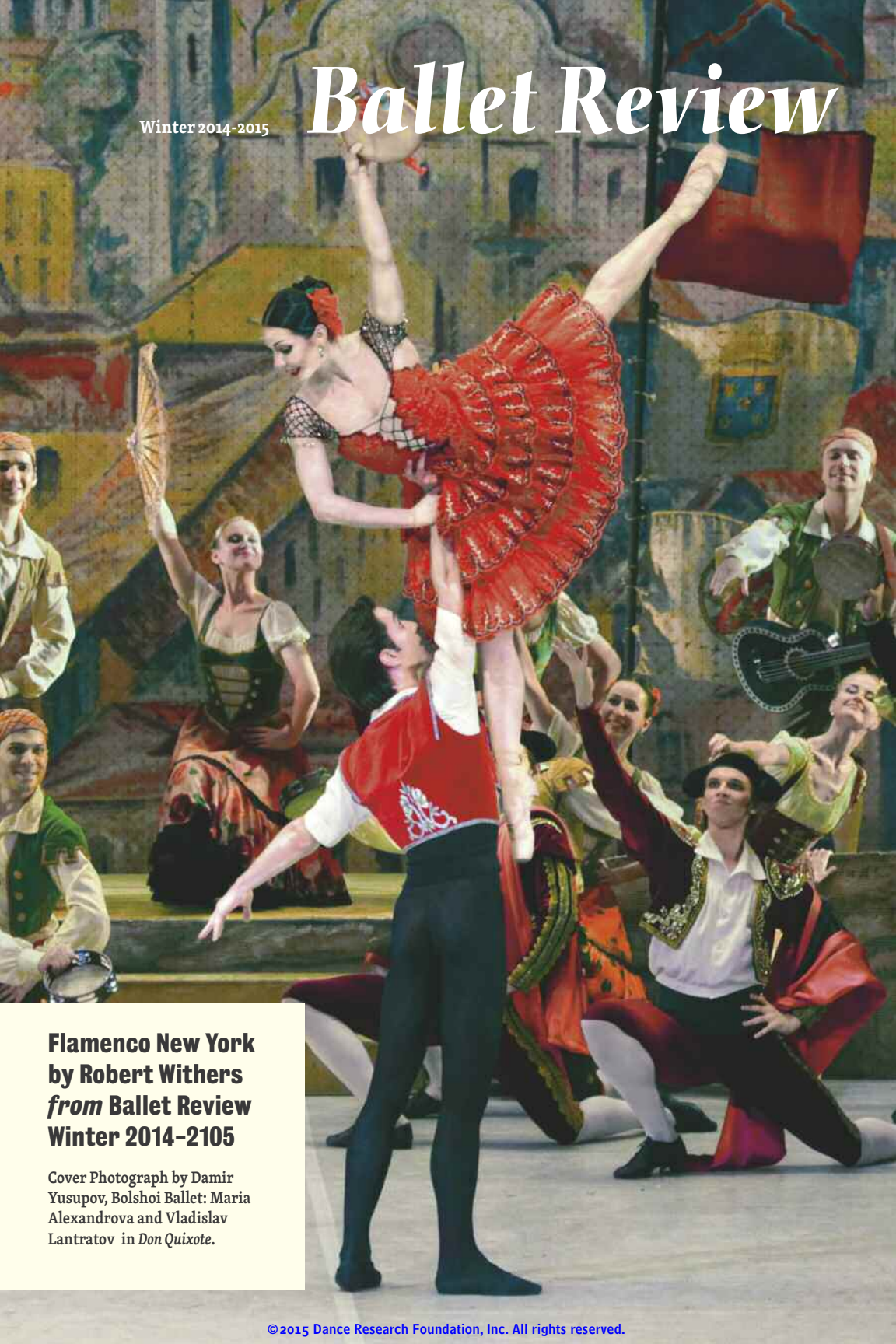


Winter 2014-2015

Ballet Review



**Flamenco New York
by Robert Withers
from Ballet Review
Winter 2014-2105**

Cover Photograph by Damir Yusupov, Bolshoi Ballet: Maria Alexandrova and Vladislav Lantratov in *Don Quixote*.

Ballet Review 42.4
Winter 2014-15

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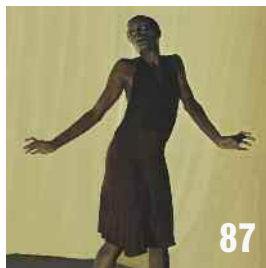
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Flamenco New York

Robert Withers

In a dusty, sunbeaten clearing in the outskirts of a dirt-poor village in Andalusia, a few men, women, and teenagers start a rhythmic hand-clapping pattern – the *palmas* – to a traditional beat and rhythmic form – a *compás*: tra-tra-TRA, tra-tra-TRA, tra-TRA, tra-TRA, tra-TRA. They build energy and complexity, tossing counterpoints of beats against beats, stamping feet and thumping hands on tables to the accents. Onlookers shout *jaleos* in excitement. A woman begins to croon a wordless song: aiee, aiee, aiee – ahaa-haha-ah . . . a-ah . . . a-ah.

That’s our notion of how flamenco lived, before guitars, before the taverns and *tablaos*, before the performances for the wealthy on their patios, before the gypsy dynasties of dancers, singers, and guitarists – the children growing up through years of practice and apprenticeship, their stints in ballet companies. Before the stages of Madrid, New York, Buenos Aires, and Tokyo. Before Broadway and the Flamenco Festival of New York’s City Center, where virtuosic ballet-trained dancers enter spotlight circles as the stage fills with fog.

*

Troubling, provocative questions seemed to haunt the flamenco of the late twentieth century: What was authentic? What was pure? How can flamenco live, preserving its roots, its soul, its heritage, and how far can it go into our time? How does it live among artists who surf the Internet, watch *The Red Shoes*, *The Black Swan*, and *Crouching Tiger* at the movies; see the Russian companies, Balanchine’s ballets, and a panoply of global dance styles and traditions? The Broadway show *Flamenco Puro* of 1986 was a grand gesture toward furthering this discussion.

Perhaps there is no other art form where we can feel the tensions of the traditional and

the modern so strongly. It’s as if flamenco recapitulates the history of Western dance and music, from court dances through ballet, modern, and postmodern; from blues to jazz to Schonberg and Cage – within 150 years, sometimes within the same performance, sometimes through the same performers.

A few decades ago, many had strong opinions on this question, though the urgency has faded somewhat as Spanish dance and flamenco live and thrive into the twenty-first century. Fusion, adaptation, and appropriation of other dance styles and traditions have become the way of the world, especially as flamenco travels around the world, even though you can still find moments and performers where the old *puro* feeling breaks through.

In fact, for centuries Spanish dance has been a scene of fusion and appropriation. The



Antonio Canales. (Photo: César Moreno Linde)

National Ballet Company of Spain is not really a ballet company. You will certainly see dances that look like European ballet coming from this company, but also versions of so-called “Spanish classical” styles – the *escuela bolero*, flamenco, and regional dances like the Aragonese *jota*. This particular company was



Carlos Rodríguez. (Photo: Jesús Vallinas)

in fact founded in 1978, by Antonio Gades, a flamenco choreographer and virtuoso.

Individual dancers/creators continue to emerge from local and national Spanish dance styles and traditions, as they have for a few centuries. When a flamenco show visits New York, especially at Broadway venues, you know it will first of all be a show, with the flamenco flavor up for grabs.

*

The City Center's Gala Flamenca is a quintessence of big-stage, Broadway- and opera-house-style theatrical flamenco, beginning with the dramatic pools of light that silhouetted from above the individual dancers in the blackness as they each solo to the individual *cantaors*. This was definitely *puro*, if not *antiguo* – until the machinery begins to fill the stage with fog, and an unseen violin soars above it.

Spare yet intense staging modernizes; the violin romanticizes. Four principals join the stage with balletic turns: maestro Antonio

Canales, virtuoso Carlos Rodríguez, young masters Karime Amaya and Jesús Carmona. A dancer has glitter on his black pants, but glitter flamenco is nothing new.

Exquisite, virtuosic rhythmic technique, more purely percussive than the traditional melodic *aires*, take us back to origins. Fog machines make the stage appear exotic, lighting from above by David Perez creates tall sculptural cones of light, each isolating a performer at the stage level. Raised arms writhe in silhouette, then blur in speed.

There is a newness to this stripping away: the solo dancer surrounded by darkness that exacerbates the risk of the solo without the support of the ensemble or even onlookers. The spare staging heightens the virtuosity and choreography of the dancer/creator – alone, apart from any orchestra or company, the origin of all music and sound. The *puro* impulse in the song, the drum, the *palmas* takes over.

Then *cantaors* and *cantaoras* appear, singing

a capella to their solo dancers, one on one, a partnership of intimacy and engagement, beyond the usual forms of background song or dance adornment.

The lights come up and Antonio Canales begins to channel a romantic poet in his fifties, recites a long, laughing, sighing text, a recitation with the rhythms and emotions of song. He begins to dance – the maestro – easily, lightly, playing with us, tossing off wry, quirky, eccentric (but always flamenco) gestures. Canales, always his own man, his own artist, works comfortably between flamenco and theatrical styles.

Melodic instruments in contemporary flamenco, even playing the classic rhythms and chord changes, wander into strange and complex chords, modern chords, away from the classic melodies, but never lose the feel. Back in the twentieth century, guitar maestro Paco de Lucía made purists uncomfortable with his excursions into jazz collaborations; now the colors of jazz tonalities have firmly inserted themselves into the flamenco mainstream, without changing its fundamentals.

After a little fusion and theater, we are suddenly back into a traditional, light-hearted *caracoles* dance. On a well-lit stage, three ladies in red whirl their long-tailed theatrical dresses, the exaggerated trains called *batas de cola*. The soloists double each other, as in ballet or jazz dance. For this standard number, the traditional ensemble of musicians, *palmeros*, and singers ranges across the back of the stage.

Is there another Western art where heritage and family are so strong? Carmen Amaya was a great international flamenco star of the 1930s and 1940s and her nieces, granddaughters, and cousins still command attention, but without her scary Callas-like edge. This year Karima Amaya, still in her twenties, carries on the tradition with strong, solid, connection to the ground and accomplished technique, unafraid to show her powerful thighs. Jesús Carmona, also of Karima's generation, mounts his traditional solos with a lively spirit and impeccable technique. These dancers, their own choreographers in the flamenco

tradition, piece together bits and routines out of the basic vocabulary. We see nothing spectacular or surprising; it's a familiar flamenco groove.

The intermixing of song, dance, and the personal create one theme of this gala. Rocio Bazán is a maestra of traditional flamenco and a famed interpreter of Manuel de Falla's *El Amor Brujo*. Staged as some kind of flamenca singer-star, she reclines resplendent on a couch, attended by flamenco beauties. Then she gradually rises – you think she will dance – and becomes a force of song. Although "Senora," a kind of Euro/Spanish torch song, is an odd choice. Was this picked to target the New York Hispanic contingent in the audience? They go wild for her.

Carlos Rodríguez, in his thirties, first compels with his elegance of simply sitting in silence. We can't take our eyes off him. Rising, he begins to show his tricks, explodes into energy, astounds with his heelwork, shows off his theatrical personality, grinning and nodding to the crowd. Why shouldn't he be pleased with himself? He's a peacock in red shoes, red cummerbund, red tie, khaki coat – a coy Euro-guy dazzling with his long legs and technique. He poses and pirouettes, the violin carrying him, and then he spins off into his own momentum, jittering, stopping, showing Broadway how to strut. The crowd loves him.

Yes, dancers can do this. But what do we feel? He's worked so hard, he's having a good time, he's got amazing moves, he's a young good-looking man. And that seems more than enough for most in this crowd. But we are missing something – even a hint at *duende*, that *je ne sais quoi* of flamenco, a feeling larger than the performer.

We think again of Antonio Canales, who signals the same self-amusement, the same comfort on the stage, close to winking, reminding us how beautiful he was, toying with the moves. Tremendously comfortable in his middle-aged body with a big man's belly curve, he does not need to work so hard.

Flamenco is sometimes about personality as much as technique. In the end, it is a show



Eva Yerbabuena and Eduardo Guerrero with singers and musicians. (Photo: courtesy of EYBF)

by pros, everyone swinging off together to the *bulerías*, the traditional close, as if the company turns the corner to another street in the barrio and leaves us behind.

Was this about generations, the passing of the torch? A showing of the stars of Spain? Perhaps the most *puro* and even *nuevo* moments were at the beginning, with the spotlights and fog, the solo virtuosos moving, through styles of their own invention, enacting lone choreographies, drumming with their heels, alone in the dark space as if no one were watching. Then a masterful singer approaches each of them, the paired cones of light, the inspired dancers and the singers who inspire them, acknowledging their grace.

*

A few nights after the City Center Gala, Eva Yerbabuena Ballet Flamenco brings her vision, her experience, and a company of skilled, charismatic professionals, to the same house.

In *Lluvia* (*Rain*), she stages traditional solos, duets, and group dances to traditional flamenco *aires*, using all the resources of stagecraft, fog, lighting, the big spaces of City Center's main stage. They are as polished and challenging as any aficionado would expect.

Yerbabuena also invents flamenco-based, modern-inflected choreography that puts soloists and groups onstage in a dance-theater context, with moves that shift fluidly between flamenco and modernist, expressionist styles.

Lluvia begins with fog and stillness. A huge black wall towers above the stage. Eva the flamenco star, dressed in a flamboyant red dress, dances, then stalks away from her own solo and physically collapses to the floor, Graham-like.

Now we see a dozen or more individual dancers stretched on the floor, each in her own spotlight. Dancers lying on the floor is something you never see in flamenco. Individual

legs shiver, arms float up, two to three others dancers start to move, spring to their knees, rise on bare feet. Yes it's flamenco; no/yes/no it's modern dance in flamenco bodies.

When they're in a happy mood, flamencos love to perform for an audience, smile, challenge, and reach out with song and dance directly to viewer. As soloists or a group, they shift between first-person taking pleasure in the dance and a second-person selling to the onlookers. Then there's that other, darker flamenco mood, when dancers go into their solitary intensities, courting the flavor of *solea*, death and *duende*.

Yerbabuena choreographs a strange turn to the dark for this ensemble. The young dancers at first seem mostly self-absorbed in feeling, enjoying their physical virtuosity until the choreography begins to still them and move them toward the back. They stand dead and frozen in darkness, too proud and beautiful to be zombies, but facing from darkness into the unknown, like statues, a backdrop of frozen bodies, while a few still live and dance in the foreground. Eva, especially, lives and dances in this foreground.

We sense her mind shifting and seeking between gestures that mime longing or passion (though without a narrative context or pretext) and those that seem pure explorations of the body. What can we do with arms and torso while keeping the flamenco flavor? The upper body especially shifts rapidly between expressionist modern dance and distinct flamenco hand and arm gestures. Bodies synch to the percussion like puppets.

The company clears the stage and Eva and a male partner dance together/apart in a way that is clearly flamenco, with heelwork, with the quick still body poses, but moving through abstracted, other-than-flamenco poses. Eva, half hidden behind her partner, makes a double figure with four arms, mirroring and compounding movement.

Meanwhile the musicians and singers float on a platform high above the floor, veiled behind a scrim, strangely removed – like a mysterious dark company of angels or muses. This

spectacular, heightened, stage artifice of Broadway/opera/ballet is visually dramatic, but the singers and players seem too far away. We miss their presence and the surprising closeness and connection of singer and guitarist to the dance that can happen in flamenco.

Meanwhile, Eva the flamenco star shines darkly in her void, rolling out impeccable, machine-like rhythms with her heels. There's no particular persona left, just a pure avatar of dance. It's beautiful, admirable, impersonal.

Then lights and music change, and we're on a bright stage in a dance of two. Not a partnering or duet, but a dance of two. A gigantic prop table invites interactions. Flipped on end it becomes a huge door, a wall, a barrier, an obstacle. There are hints of a situation and relationship if not a story: Someone is blocked. Someone bangs themselves against a wall. The rhythmic heelwork of the *taconeado* is exquisite.

Is something going on between these two and does it matter? The abstracted expressionist gestures recall Pina Bausch, but there is no conceptual or narrative motor for the interaction between the dancers. Does there need to be? Perhaps this is a kind of post-modern mime, with freely unmotivated gestures of feeling that don't need to connect to relationships or narrative experiences. Again, we miss the emotional connection that flamenco at its best can make.

Then we move on to a new scene, an ensemble of a dozen or so dancers, and a switch to a new gambit: ironic, self-conscious flamenco in a cliché tavern (but with perfect technique, of course). Performers play with fans and stools, a wink at clichés; a female dances with rolling hips; a man jokes with a fan; dancers play to each other; the ensemble does mirrored steps like a chorus line. At the same time, this is traditional and knowing, like the fun and funny *bulerías* ensemble number that most flamenco shows close with. It's choreographed clowning around by superb dancers. The jokes are familiar.

But the show doesn't end here. Other num-



Israel Galván with singer Inés Bacán and percussionist Bobote. (Photo: Félix Vázquez)

bers follow – the also-familiar flamenco mysterious moods with Eva (again the solo star amid the fog) performing more virtuosic, perfect dancing, always admirable. In one number, Eva swings the long dress train of the *bata di cola* so that it swirls and follows her feet like a live animal. In another, Eva enacts a maestra, a witch, a queen, a goddess. Three singers conjure the goddess out of her body. She seems destined to inhabit this persona, the one she longs for.

*

Israel Galván is thinking about flamenco in the twenty-first century from the ground up, but with a sense of flamenco's own avant-garde history. In 1924 in Paris, *bailaor* Vicente Escudero presented a cubist/surrealist flamenco, mixing images of *futbol* with tap dance mimicking the sound of falling chairs. His show, *La Courbe*, introduced Josephine Baker's jazz dance of the year. Guitarists wouldn't work with Escudero because they claimed he didn't

know the *compás*, the traditional rhythm, but he became an international star nonetheless. So much for flamenco *puro* in the 1920s.

Galván does know the *compás*, deeply, and pushes both *puro* and cubist, surreal flamenco forward into the postmodern and the twenty-first century. He reframes the classic rhythms and accents, the arms, the straight posture, the curved back so that all is deeply familiar yet utterly strange. We see ideas of dance, ideas about flamenco, but integrated deeply and seamlessly into the tradition.

For *La Curva* at Pace University Galván uses no curtain, no décor, no lighting design, no fog. We can see through to the unfinished back wall of the stage of Pace's Schimmel Center, with stacks of chairs, odd and oversized props (including a grand piano) in the spirit of the Judson Church school of postmodern dance. A huge, rectangular wooden table will serve as a tavern setting for song, an instrument for percussion, a wall, and a risky platform for

dance. The high stacks of chairs will fall in crescendos, jarringly, repeatedly until you come to expect it – until later when you’ve forgotten and are startled again.

Galván strolls into the playing space without fanfare, moves some furniture around. Carefully, he will pull forward a chair for Inés Bacán, a solid, mature, old-school gypsy flamenca from the province of Sevilla. She brings the spirit of “deep song,” of *cante jondo*, to this show, the strange old weirdness of melodic voice that shifts between vowels and cries between the quartertones of gypsy modes and scales, beyond major and minor. Like the Bulgarian choirs or throat singers of Tuva, Bacán’s music is more modern than we have imagined such music could be.

This company comprises four strikingly different artists, Inés Bacán the *cantaora*; José Jiménez Santiago “Bobote,” neither dancer nor singer, but driving the *compás* with *palmas* and table rapping; Sylvie Courvoisier, the pianist/improviser/composer of twentieth century and downtown knowledge; and Israel Galván himself, who slips like quicksilver between flamenco and the modern.

Galván embodies a consummate flamenco technique, building on traditional gestures – especially percussion, handsnaps, body-slaps, teethtaps – turning what we know as accents into an amazing tonal/technical music. Dancing pure flamenco, modern, post-modern, acrobatics, the one style he eschews is the emotional, expressionist mime, unless with irony. Though there’s nothing more emotional than his sudden, attacking lunges against the solid wooden table, his flailing windmill arms – you can hear the whipping of the air. Say the sound of the heels, tak-see, tak-see, and Galván is shouting “Taxi! Taxi!” in comic passion; the sound becomes the word becomes the sound.

No matter how far he ranges, Galván builds from the basic flamenco idiom – a straight back, or a bullfighter’s curve, extended sharp hands and arms, fleeting poses with arms and legs, frozen frames in the flow. There are poses of Nijinsky, long passages through silence,

through turn-of-the-century Parisian modernism, the spirit of Satie, Stravinsky – all the pleasure of a classical virtuoso, but constant surprise, change, invention. He opens up flamenco to a bigger universe.

The spare yet witty stagecraft recalls Yvonne Rainer and Meredith Monk, and again the stagings of Pina Bausch (but not her dance style, not her emotional, overwrought moods). There is nothing of Broadway here except the bare ambience of *A Chorus Line*.

Flamenco has always inspired composers, from Manuel de Falla to Hector Berlioz to Miles Davis. But nobody plays the piano in flamenco, or if they do it’s always wrong. Nonetheless, Galván has engaged postmodernist virtuoso Sylvie Courvoisier as collaborator and composer, and their collaboration carries you in and out of musical and dance worlds, through Satie, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg, back to tender or driving ostinatos that mesh seamlessly back into Galván’s percussive heelwork and Bobote’s hand drumming on the great table. Courvoisier never quite plays flamenco, but sometimes slides into the traditional rhythm of the *compás*, with tonalities of her own invention.

The silences are just as important: the spare, Morton Feldman-like chords; the Cagean prepared piano. Not only does Courvoisier get her hands into the strings of the piano, striking long, resonant tones, but Galván himself checks in under the hood for grace notes to his bodily sound clusters, clappings and slappings. Then Courvoisier/piano and Galván pull apart again, piano and heels building to percussive climax. Yah-hee-JA! ktik kik KAH! Kick-a-kick, tic-a-tick-kick KAH!

(You don’t hear it said in New York, but flamenco swings. When the rhythm is working you can’t sit still, even if you’re in a standard orchestral theater seat where all you can twitch is your neck, not your booty.)

Galván surrenders the lead for long stretches to Bacán, Bobote, Courvoisier, then slides or crashes back in, dancing in tones from absurd, to comic, to deadly serious, to moody transport, carried by the long ranges of mu-

sical phrases and periods. Not a series of set pieces, this long symphonic development carries you seamlessly through the music of the dance, the song, the piano, the percussion – categories and instruments that don't convey the sweep and scope of this orchestration of movement and sound, the shifting, building, slowing dynamics.

I think of *Cirque du Soleil*, not because of the acrobatics, but because of the constant invention, the shifts between energies and personalities. It's remarkable that just these four performers alone on stage, each with a unique voice and instrument, can carry the solo energy for so long, playing in solos, duets, trios, passing the lead from one to another.

Moments of song and dance could not be more *puro*, yet stripped away from theater on the bare stage, the show seems to become more modern. Or is the bareness of an unadorned stage our own modernist spectacle?

For a dance/music piece there is so much quiet in this piece, so much stillness. The grand piano releases single notes that drop like stars into space. Courvoisier's piano bends to blues, to a Japanese koto sound, segues into driving rhythms, open, free rhythms. Galván moves from still pose to still pose, a visual drum and a silent basso profundo to Courvoisier's flow. Courvoisier's rhythms somehow lead into and match classic flamenco rhythm and song – find and match the pulse – yet she does not play a single tune you would recognize as flamenco.

Bobote drives the rhythm with his powerful *palmas* and shouts/*jaleos*, finding classic *bulerías* and *siguriyas*, unafraid to sing a few verses if moved. Galván pulls his coat over his head and becomes a strange headless figure

dancing to classic *bulerías*. This metaphor happens instantly, without setup, and is dropped as casually. Another choreographer might have turned this into a ten-minute set piece. Galván doesn't waste our time: we get it, he's moves on.

Then without our understanding exactly how he got there, Galván mimes a white-face Pierrot, in thin black tights, a character from a Cocteau film, wavering to Schoenbergian sprites in the music. You hear Courvoisier echoing Stravinsky and Satie, then in a later passage she plays Stravinsky and Satie outright, fragments from *The Rite of Spring* and the *Gymnopédies* that drive and relax Galván's dance, until she slips back into her own compositional flow.

The shape on the stage floor you thought was a rectangle of light becomes an arena of sand or dust. Galván kicks, stamps, flails; the stuff swirls in the light. Suddenly he lunges to the floor – again, never in flamenco – but now he's down in the white dust, flinging it over his head.

Galván's black figure is covered with the white dust or flour, transforming his elegance to the elemental. He pulls Bobote to his feet and they dance tenderly, quietly, arm in arm. Bacán rises singing, and her voice seems to open into a vast echoing space.

All exit, walking.

Galván mounts a stunning vision of the relationship between the *puro*, the *antiguo*, and the modern. His formula: Keep the oldest, strangest, most powerful of the old. Revel in the traditions, the diversity, and the conceptual edginess of the modern. Forget about Mr. In-Between. Let the edges clash, the beauties overwhelm each other.