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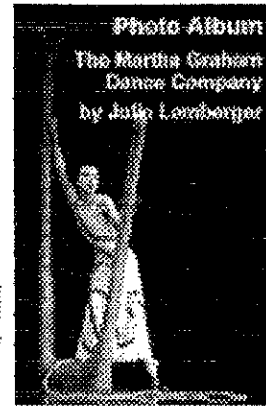
Out of the Fog, 12-22: From the Sublime to the Stupendous Yerbabuena Circles; 7 Fingers Traces

By Aimée Ts'ao

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BERKELEY, California -- If ever you see the name Eva Yerbabuena on a marquee, or in an advertisement for a performance, you MUST go even if you detest flamenco. I say that because Yerbabuena is not only the epitome of flamenco but she also transcends the form. She is a brilliant dancer -- no, she's an extraordinary artist, period. She leaves me groping through my internal thesaurus to find the words to describe exactly how she completely mesmerizes the audience. Hers is a quality as ephemeral as dance itself. The first time I saw her two years ago, I was utterly transported and this time, Friday, December 8, also at a concert presented by Cal Performances at Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley, I once more found myself in another realm.

I'm hardly an expert on flamenco. I listen to the music occasionally on CDs, I have gone to see live performances half a dozen times per year for the past 30 years, and I still retain the threadbare remnant of a childhood dream of being a gypsy when I grow up. I like to think that I can discern a good flamenco artist from a mediocre one, even though I don't know the jargon to discuss the technical details that lead me to that conclusion.



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Yerbabuena's dancing is compelling because she fills her body and the atmosphere around her with herself, with her emotions. In a sense, the act of dancing makes her fearless in revealing herself on stage. By putting her vulnerability first and foremost, she actually protects herself by wrapping her sensitivity in her art. While some flamenco dancers seem to be trying hard to be intense, Yerbabuena simply IS intense.

The other aspect of her dancing that makes her stand out is the roundness and fullness of her execution of movements. This could be partially attributed to her adhering to more traditional forms of flamenco in this era of nuevo flamenco, but it is also Yerbabuena's embracing a broad spectrum of movement possibilities. In most dance forms it is easy to achieve very linear and angular shapes given that the human body has jointed arms and legs. Creating circles or circular movements involves using the various joints as the center of circles with the extremities describing arcs through space. These arcs and circles, however, often lay in a single plane, and still leave the design of the choreography in two dimensions. Yerbabuena works in spirals and spheres, projecting the circles into three dimensions. The juxtaposition of many different curves and trajectories, moving in a variety of directions simultaneously, creates a rich visual and kinesthetic palette. It is impossible to distinguish if this physical wealth is the result of the emotional richness or vice versa. Perhaps the two are inextricably woven together and mutually dependent on one another.

The performance of "Eva: A Cal y Canto" (this roughly translates as "bricks and mortar," hinting that Yerbabuena is interested in exploring the basic elements or building blocks of flamenco), the piece shown at Zellerbach, was in keeping with Yerbabuena's high standards, though I must confess that next to her only one of the other six dancers in her company, Eduardo Guerrero, comes close to her level. He moved so viscerally and with such commitment that I couldn't take my eyes off him unless Yerbabuena was also on stage. The musicians, including the eminent composer and guitarist Paco Jarana, who is also Yerbabuena's husband, were also extremely accomplished and the use of saxophone and flute allowed for a more contemporary sound than found in much traditional flamenco music.

Yerbabuena's choreography uses the space of the stage in much the same way that she herself dances – it fills it up. The

formations also seem more akin to modern dance or ballet stagings than flamenco ones. To indicate yet another dimension to this already multi-faceted artist, in an interview on Flamenco-world.com Yerbabuena said, "I adore Pina Bausch artistically and personally; she's one of my muses"; last year she went to Germany to dance in one of Bausch's productions.

Little did I realize how quickly the circus would catch up with me again. On Wednesday, December 13, I went to the opening night of "Traces," produced by the Montreal-based circus collective the 7 Fingers and presented by the Circus Center of San Francisco at the Palace of Fine Arts Theater. What a fabulous show!

First of all, the five performers are top-notch. The four young men, Brad Henderson, Will Underwood and brothers Francisco and Raphael Cruz all trained at the Circus Center starting when they were kids, specifically Chinese acrobatics with Master Lu Yi, formerly of the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe. After graduating they continued their studies at the Ecole Nationale de Cirque de Montreal, where they met the fifth member of the cast, the Parisian Heloise Bourgeois. Because they have been working together now for several years the rapport between them is unusually strong.

Second, the choreography and direction by 7 Fingers members Shana Carroll and Gypsy Snider would easily categorize "Traces" as an evening-length dance/performance piece with circus tricks seamlessly slipped in. In fact, many dance choreographers could learn a thing or two about how to put a show together from these two women. There are moments in which I think I am watching contact improv on steroids. These performers do it all: dance, juggle, skateboard, play piano or guitar, hand-balance, and jump through hoops, literally, to insure that the audience goes home totally satisfied. Yet they are all more than 20-trick-ponies. As they introduce themselves to the crowd and interject bits of personal information throughout the show, they become tangible. We begin to know them as human beings and develop an empathy with them. The only weak link is the story-line or premise for the action, which I didn't figure out during the performance, but only afterward when I read the program. By then it didn't even matter, I still loved it. This high energy, very contemporary urban production is definitely a 'must see' for people of all ages.