

Flamenco's heart has Sephardi beat

Flamenco dance has seen a burst of popularity in Israel in recent years. Joy Sable speaks to Israeli dancer Ornili Azulay to find out why

If you had to imagine a flamenco dancer, then Ornili Azulay is the living embodiment of what you might conjure up. Long, dark hair, sinuous limbs and flashing eyes, she moves with a combination of grace and sensuality, the epitome of a Spanish dancer. There is one difference: Ornili is not Spanish. She is Israeli-born and bred, but has become an established star on the international flamenco scene, and has done much to popularise the art in her native country.

It is wrong to simply define Ornili as a dancer. She describes herself as a creative artist: she has studied drama at RADA, performed and written poetry, and choreographed many of her own works. Indeed, it is hard to find just one word to describe this multi-talented woman.

During her childhood, there were no particular signs that she would forge a career as a specialist in Spanish dancing. She did what lots of other little girls do – took classes in piano, ballet and drama – and though she did well at all three, particularly in drama, it was not until she was 11 and saw Carlos Saura's groundbreaking 1983 film *Carmen* that she fell in love with flamenco.

At this point, it is important to explain what exactly flamenco is. Although, as Ornili says, "the dance has become the greatest ambassador of flamenco", it is first and foremost a musical form and is made up of guitar playing, singing and dancing.

It was the dancing, particularly that of Antonio Gades, the film's star, which impressed Ornili and inspired her to take flamenco classes. "The image of Antonio Gades changed my life and I fell deeply in love with the art," she says. She studied under a succession of top teachers, such as Silvia Duran in Israel, and other leading exponents in Spain, including Antonio Canales and Paco Fernandez. This combination of hard work and extraordinary talent enabled Ornili to forge a successful international career, including dancing *Carmen* at the Los Angeles Opera under the direction of Plácido Domingo and performing as a soloist under the direction of Zubin

Mehta with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. She has also performed her own choreography to Ariel Ramírez's *Misa Criolla* at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles and recently danced at an international conference at Oxford University.

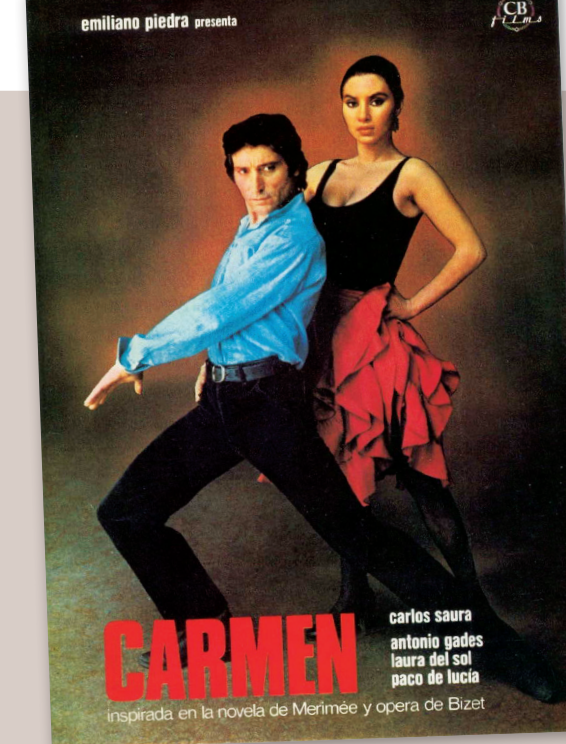
But why has flamenco become so popular in Israel? Many dance companies now specialise in the form, such as Sharon Saguy's *Flamenco Natural*, Michal Natan's *Compas* and *Remangar*, and there are classes for a growing fanbase in cities across the country. Ornili

likes to think it is something to do with the intense mix of cultures to be found in Israel: "What happens in this marvellous, crazy, Middle Eastern crossroads is a mix of East, West, Jews, Muslims...I can't think of

any other art form that excites all kinds of Jewish people and Arabs."

When she talks of all kinds of Jewish people, aside from the various levels of religious observance to be found in Israel, she is talking about the two main strands of Judaism which meet there: Ashkenazi and Sephardi. Her father was an Ashkenazi Jew from Poland who died when she was very young, and his extended family perished in the Holocaust, so she has little connection with that side of her ancestry – something she regrets. Brought up in Ramat Gan by her Sephardi lawyer mother – Ornili's grandmother was from Damascus – she is more in tune with her Sephardi roots. A career as a classical Spanish dancer is perhaps not so strange, after all.

Ornili is quick to acknowledge that there are few dancers today who are what she calls 'pure' flamenco dancers. True flamenco originated in a specific region of Spain. "Flamenco is the art form of Andalucía, whereas Spanish dance is a much wider term, which includes other regional dance styles,



Sephardi passion: Ornili Azulay; Carlos Saura's 1983 film of *Carmen*

such as the Jota, for example, the musical form and folk dance of Aragon," she explains. Indeed, Spain seems to be one giant cultural sponge, soaking up influences from any ethnic group which has ever lived in the land for a length of time. "Get into a car at any given spot in Spain and every 10 or 15 kilometres you will get different food, clothing, dialects, music and dance forms," she laughs.

If flamenco is influencing Israelis today, then there is a poetic balance to it because hundreds of years ago, Judaism extended its own influence upon flamenco. It was not alone of course; many other influences, including those originating from Islamic and Romany traditions probably also made important contributions to the art form.

"Jews and Muslims were expelled from Spain pretty much at the same time," she explains. "That's when gypsies started arriving [probably from India, although there were also Andalusian gypsies] and filled in the cultural vacuum. So gypsies influenced the art of flamenco immensely. Nowadays, maybe 10 or 20 dancers can be defined as true flamenco dancers – almost all of them are gypsies."

The Jews who had lived in Spain left their own mark, not so much on the dancing, but on the songs. "There is a musical closeness between flamenco music and Sephardi liturgical music," says Ornili.

Listen to the plaintive Sephardi laments on the destruction of the Temple and there is a link, deep in

the music, with the songs of the flamenco singer. The late Spanish flamenco guitarist and composer Paco de Lucía, who revolutionised the art of flamenco, acknowledged the Sephardi influence on its music.

It is not just the music which appeals to the modern Israeli. Ornili says when flamenco was first performed in Israel, the dancing amazed audiences: "It always struck people as something very graceful and elegant. Everybody was intrigued by the restrained sensuality of the art of flamenco. I feel it almost gave Jewish women – specifically Sephardi women – personal redemption. Jewish women do

not easily allow themselves to show off their sensuality. Traditionally, they are educated to be shyer, more reserved. In flamenco, you can be very feminine but very covered. Remember, the Spanish dancer does not dance in a tutu, her skirt is long!"

Whereas ballet is unyielding in its demand for a specific body type – lean, flat-chested and long-limbed – Spanish dancing is more forgiving, according to Ornili. "Bodies that would be considered way too heavy for classical ballet would still work beautifully for Spanish dance, where you can make use of whatever body shape you have and express it."

Classical ballet is constantly seeking to defy gravity with the emphasis on appearing weightless, but the opposite is true of Spanish dancing. "Flamenco has an intimate relationship with the earth, it's about worshipping the earth," says Ornili.

The immediate future promises to be a busy one for Ornili. She is currently working on a solo show based on works by the Spanish playwright Federico García Lorca. She will interpret his poems, monologues and other writings through words, dance and video art. The project, *Solo Lorca*, is due to have its premiere later in 2018 at the Federico García Centre in Granada to coincide with the 120th anniversary of Lorca's birth.

In the meantime she will continue her lifelong dedication to flamenco – spreading the knowledge of this centuries-old art to new audiences both in Israel and around the world. Muchas gracias, Ornili. ■

See: ornili.com. Joy Sable is a freelance journalist specialising in dance.

How Jewish is Flamenco?

The jury is still out on how much influence Jewish music had on flamenco, says Rebecca Taylor

SEPHARDI – OR ASHKENAZI?

Musicologists believe that flamenco is related more to Ashkenazi synagogue music than it is to Sephardi music. It can be linked to the chazanut or the cantorial style of eastern Europe, whose modulations are reminiscent of flamenco singing. Whether or not these melodies go back to the singing of the Levites in the Temple, or simply share a single eastern Mediterranean source with Arabic music, whose influence on flamenco was enormous, they can be clearly heard in the cante jondo, the 'deep song' that is flamenco at its purest.

SEPHARDI ROMANÇEROS

There are close parallels to flamenco music in Sephardi songs known as *romançeros*. A well-known one called *La Petenera*, with its line "Dónde vas bella judía?" ("Where are you going, you Jewish beauty?") has cante jondo elements. The fact that such a song was taken by Jewish exiles from Spain in 1492 demonstrates that it belongs to the earliest stage of flamenco singing, whose known history does not go back much further.

FLEMISH OR FLAMINGO?

The word 'flamenco' in Spanish has two meanings: 'Flemish' and 'flamingo'. The Spanish had contact with the Flemings, because Flanders, the Dutch-speaking area of what today is Belgium, was under Spanish Habsburg occupation for nearly 300 years. Earlier than that, flamenco in Spanish had taken on the sense of fair-skinned – the Flemings being lighter complexioned than the darker Spaniards. Because a ruddy pink is the colour of the flamingo's under-wings, it came to be called flamenco too.

Why should this word have been used for the passionate singing of Spanish gypsies? Some speculate it came from Jewish exiles who took songs like *La Petenera* with them to the Netherlands. But lexicographer Joan Corominas has traced the use of the word flamenco to 1870, hundreds of years too late for it to have anything to do with Jews in Flanders. He shows how it went from meaning 'fair-skinned' to 'dashing' and from there to 'gypsy-like'. Flamenco was simply music sung by gypsies. ■

Source: *Flamenco's Deep Roots* by Philologos, Forward, 2004.