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[Translation by JEAN MARIE TRUJILLO AND KATYA SOLL]¹ MICHELLE HEFFNER HAYES initiative.

Juan Carlos Lérída: Flamenco's Aura of Authenticity is False



Juan Carlos Lérída. Photo: Cati Bestard

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With a jaded eye, I attend the performance of *Al cante*. Even entering into the room, when the only lights still shining were the stage lights, the click was instantaneous: beneath a simple set we see what remains of a *cantaor* and a *bailaor* confronting the clichés of flamenco. "Everyone has aaaa star," says

¹ <http://barcelones.com/cultura/juan-carlos-lerida-el-aura-de-autenticidad-del-flamenco-es-falsa/2016/02/>

the first, who ends up in outer space, while we laugh, think, and become engrossed, not necessarily in that order. Half a year later, a new encounter in Barcelona. I agree with the hardened musical reporter, who tweets, ecstatically, "This is the most delirious, groundbreaking, and comic work that I have seen on stage in years. A milestone: irreverent, visually very poetic, avant-garde, colloquial, rooted, unrooted . . . The *cante* according to Autechre and Chiquito de la Calzada." His reaction describes the euphoric incredulity that is transmitted through seeing a work that manages to mix together rabid avant-garde, poetic fantasy, and humor in artichoke-like layers.

AL CANTE (Teaser)

Directed by Juan Carlos L erida (Fulda, 1971), with the participation of playwright **David Montero** and the now deservedly omnipresent **Ni o de Elche**, it is the second part of a trilogy that studies at a bodily level the expressive foundations of flamenco, that is, the *toque*, the *cante*, and the *baile*.

"They are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," L erida summarizes. He is not a typical artist: as much a *bailaor* as a *bailar n*, now the one, now the other, even both of them, and many others; **his work blurs the normative limits that separate flamenco and contemporary dance**, as he moves along a narrow path in which he closes the doors of tradition in order to open new windows. "You always have to be questioning technique, or you end up creating aesthetics," he explains. So, for example, he performs footwork in an unorthodox manner, off balance, and instead of dancing flamenco *palos*, he flees from the dictatorship of the *comp as* and improvises, even moving to the sound of *glitches* in the style of Raster Noton or affirming that the music of Steve Reich or Bill Evans & Eddie G omez has "saved his life".



AL CANTE. Juan Carlos L erida&Ni o de Elche. Photo: Aida Vargas.

The multifaceted L erida is also an actor, choreographer, professor, educator, and organizer. "I have it all in my memory," he affirms. In a career of less than half a century, he has done commissions for **Joaqu n Cort es**, **Bel n Maya**, and **Las Migas**, danced in the *tablaos* of Seville and Japan, and created his own company, 2D1, which he abandoned after realizing with horror that he was "lying by creating fusion concepts." At that point he took a step back, studied choreography, and designed and created his own festival, Flamenco Emp rico, which, beginning in 2009, over a five-year period, sought to bring international artists together at the **Mercat de les Flors**, artists who, taking flamenco as a point of departure, "drank of experience and not technique or tradition," to thus "move the space of flamenco."

Currently, he balances his doctoral studies with shows, workshops for improvisation and bodily expression, and his responsibilities as a professor of flamenco, contemporary dance, and composition in the **Institut del Teatre**, where we are now. Barcelona is an important city for him. "It reincarnated me. Here I confronted my education and formation," he explains as we walk through Poble Sec, his favorite area. Better known in Germany than in Spain and in Barcelona than in Seville or Madrid, he considers the Ciudad Condal his artistic home. But in a circular twist of fate, his first memories were formed in the country of Angela Merkel. "My parents went to Germany to work for 10 years: my father in a tire factory and my mother in hotels. We returned when I was three years old. My first flamenco memories are photographic, from when they had parties with the Spaniards who lived there and I would dance around. There was always flamenco or something flamenco-fied playing." Upon returning, they bought a flat with the money that they had sent back, in San Juan de Aznalfarache, a town three kilometers from Seville. "My mother stayed at home, and then she worked in a hotel that opened during the 92 Expo. My father worked as a salesman, with the car, selling Gispert cash registers. I always remember him going out in a suit and tie. They were well off. They had come from Germany, and we had a good job here. I remember it because we would spend the summer at the beach."

TWENTY-TWO CUPS, PEOPLE TOUCHING HIS HEAD, AND SOCCER TEAM *TABLAOS*: BEGINNINGS

These first experiences began to mold him. "I traveled around Germany, and they assumed that dance is what I liked. They never asked me nor did it ever occur to me to sing or play an instrument. I would dance alone. They turned on the music and I would dance. They signed me up at an academy because they wanted me to be an artist. There is an anecdote from when I was born. In gypsy culture there is a tradition that if you cut your child's first fingernail behind the door, he will turn out to be an artist, and they cut mine, so just imagine the pressure. [laughter] And in the end they were right." Born of a gypsy father, he had an uncle who was a poet and another who was a flamenco *cantaor*. "Going to Germany toned down this culture of open doors. I suppose it was because of the stigma: being a gypsy and prospering didn't go together well. But I remember being at home, and even if I didn't want to, I would be listening to flamenco. In weddings or first communions I would end up dancing because my parents would introduce me as their son the *bailaor*. My mother would always carry castanets in her bag, and if an opportunity for me to dance came up, she would say 'Oh, I have the castanets in my bag! What a coincidence!!' [laughter]"

Because of the lack of dance competitions at the academy, he began to go to *sevillanas* contests. "I went to all the area festivals. I won 22 cups [laughter]. Now they have lost importance, just like the festivals. There was the *Miss* competition, the best *caseta*, the *cante*, and the *sevillanas*, for children, youth, and adults. My parents would sign me up at city hall. You would sign up in pairs, they would hold the festival, and you would compete. They awarded a prize, but they didn't pay us. The director of the town school, the mayor, sometimes the previous *Miss* would judge, and there were experts and public figures. The principal artist would give us the prize. I remember being very small and people patting my head. It was horrid [he laughs]. The *sevillanas* competition was very important in the town. My parents still remember how Antonio Machín came and *cantaores* too. It was more in the theaters that I would see *bailaores*. We would go if there was an opportunity, maybe a couple times a month," he relates.



Juan Carlos Lériða. Photo: J.L.L

Then he began to notice something: "When I was a child, there were not so many mixed couples. Almost all were pairs of women. It was a plus." But at the same time, it wielded a social sanction, because he was the only boy in the world of dance, and very feminized. "Dancing was not a masculine thing. There were no other boys, so you weren't normal. This was expressed with the word *maricón* [fag], with not being able to spend my free time with them, because I was going to the academy. And in recess I didn't know how to play soccer." I comment to him that there are well-known *bailaores*, but he explains, "My case was not typical. I started very young. Many began later. I am very interested in people who have danced since a young age, because there is a secret understanding among us about typical relationships at that age. Instead of playing, we were dancing at the academies. It makes me think that I was professionalized at a very young age, because everything was related to dance, to flamenco. Weekends were dedicated either to the *sevillanas* contests or to dancing with the academy—always to artistic endeavors."

Shortly after, as a teenager, he began to take classes in business management. "It did me no good. It was just to 'have something just in case.' My parents always supported me, but they didn't have a wide enough perspective to send me somewhere to study. They couldn't visualize that process." At about that time, he joined a Sevillian *tablao*. "Now I start to have a salary and a fixed evening schedule. Until that point there had

been short tours, but working there you start to understand how it all works: who the primary and secondary figures are, the novices, the leader who utilizes his employees to reach a series of theatrical or artistic objectives; I remember it as a professional training, because I would watch *bailaores* and *bailaoras* much older than I was, and every day they would transmit their knowledge as I shared the experience with them. Always working at night made me grow up, because afterwards I wouldn't go straight home. I would stay to have dinner or have a drink. Being part of a flamenco *tablao* was like being on a soccer team. You belong to this particular one."

FROM A GREAT EXPLOSION TO CRISIS In the daytime he would go to class: "I began to study the dramatic arts. So in some way the *tablaó* was not my only point of reference. And it was a great explosion to enter a school where you didn't just dance; you studied the dramatic arts, the history of theater, music, or mime. I wanted an integrated school, like in *Fame*, and besides, in the academy there were other boys. I discovered contemporary dance and realized that I could go in that direction. At night I worked at a *tablaó*, and the two things [flamenco and contemporary dance] always went along together." But soon, combining these two things began to create dilemmas that went beyond mere exhaustion. "The schedules conflicted, and I was at two extremes: flamenco was not accepted in the space of the dramatic arts and contemporary dance, and besides, I was in Seville, Andalusia, where in order to survive, contemporary dance had to start with a negation of flamenco. Flamenco was very much present in Andalusia and on television. There was no interaction. Contemporary dance was exotic. I couldn't use many of my flamenco references within contemporary dance the way you can now. In fact, I felt that at the expressive level they got in the way, because they hardened me. And there were things I could not express in the *tablaó* setting. The contradiction began when it became more and more clear in the flamenco setting that I was widening my expressive resources, and I had to hide that."

This came to a head when, after five years, Lériða left the *tablaó* to work for a few seasons with a company in Japan. "We would tour for a month, and I would come back to Spain with good money, and all of this continued to develop me. In the mornings I would spend a lot of time just watching other aesthetics and thinking about dance, and that's when my abilities as a choreographer began to emerge. I did traditional flamenco until they suggested that I do something more unique, because they noticed that I had other ideas. It was a success, and for some time this unique quality would get me gigs in an opera or as a *bailarín*, but there came a time when I no longer had a place in the gigs that flamenco dancers auditioned for, and I didn't have a big enough name for myself that I could take off on my own. I wasn't prepared for that anyway. I was kicked out of those circles. At the contemporary dance auditions, I would present myself disguised as a contemporary dancer, and in the flamenco camp they told me I couldn't be so contemporary. The crisis came when I said goodbye to it all and came to Barcelona, around 1994 or 1995. In order to survive, I had to keep learning and make my own way. And here I started to sense that this could all come together."

DOING ALCHEMY, GLUING IT TOGETHER In Barcelona, you were exposed to other stimuli and began to integrate them in order to determine your path. What elements would you say were decisive

in achieving this? I realized that, just as in flamenco, contemporary dance was linked to a predetermined form and predetermined types of movements, and to fixed rhythmic structures, but with Mercedes Boronat I discovered improvisation techniques. She developed me as an interpreter, creator, and philosopher of dance, and she gave me the tools to try to smooth the rough surfaces between my flamenco expressiveness and my disguise of contemporary *bailarín* and to solidify them both. I always had to translate my outside influences to my knowledge of flamenco. Because the professors still saw it like something that wasn't really related. Flamenco used to be anti-contemporary.



Juan Carlos Lérída. Photo Art-work: www.daniel-alonso.tumblr.com

How would you explain to someone who was not an expert in the field what incompatibilities might exist between contemporary dance and dancing flamenco? Where would the friction be felt? In gesture, expressiveness? To construct oneself as a contemporary dancer in Seville, Andalusia, you had to deny all of your cultural references, which are real beasts: flamenco, bullfighting, and Holy Week. Which meant that there wasn't a place for me there to present myself as a flamenco dancer. There is something different about the muscle tension and the way rhythm is utilized. I remember that in the contemporary dance context they would always tell me, "Don't try so hard; don't make yourself suffer so much." As for the body, in flamenco one always works from a frontal plane. Always looking forward, as if what happens behind you or to the side does not resonate in the body. This constant, like the excessive expressive force, made me feel that I was rejected in the non-flamenco context. In the flamenco context, anything that had an aseptic form with continuity of movement and unusual costuming was rejected.

The other day Lipi Hernandez, a teacher who is clarifying a lot of things for me, was telling me that the contemporary body tries not to make sounds or noises; it works in a space beyond sound. And the flamenco body wants to be noticed, to make sounds, and this creates in the diaphragm a different relationship with space. I found connections, and that is what I developed and continue to develop, but from the outside it was not very clear. In fact, it was rejected. Because what I was importing from contemporary dance was decoding structures at the expressive level within flamenco.

How did seeing the expressive channel of contemporary dance at school widen these inputs? The music was different, and one listened to it with a new freedom. I remember dancing to music that you didn't have to count to. The relationship of its contact with the body was different than in

flamenco. Being a man wasn't a problem. I didn't feel this conflict that I had when I was younger. There were more boys, and that created a sense of community. At a gestural level it allowed me to do a lot more. I studied and danced flamenco in very small spaces, and contemporary was in large spaces, which literally opened things up for me.

What attracted you to choreography itself? What parts are you interested in? [Silence] Placing flamenco bodies in another place that doesn't exist—I think that is my interest now. It used to be just the desire to put them in another place, and now I've realized that by positioning them in another place, one can see flamenco bodies in a different way, but that place can also be seen in a different way.

When do you begin to decide that you want to place that body in the space of flamenco? When do you detect this and why? What is especially interesting to you about the body? It comes to me from not seeing it in other flamenco bodies—not seeing it, but intuiting that the other bodies do want or need to go there. I realize that the information is in my body, because I have lived it. That's where the concept of empirical flamenco comes from. So then, I try to observe the bodies of others and, starting with the references that I have within myself, to see what I can give to those bodies, not so that they become me, but so they become what I believe they want to be in the flamenco context. A moment comes when I don't find people I can communicate with directly, because, on the one hand, flamenco lacks a holistic formation that would integrate knowledge of the body as a whole and not just the parts that compose it. On the other hand, there's the empirical component involved in daily practices. The daily practice is responsible for your poetics, your artistic discourse. And more often than not, I found that there was an imbalance. Well, I can find people who have the interest or desire to be different, to widen their resources and forms, to modify structures, but they do not abandon the resources they acquired, which are maintained as an element that others can recognize. You don't want to lose people's appreciation and support. But I always say that you have to let things go in order to mutate, be transformed, or change. And in flamenco you have to leave behind, temporarily or permanently, the *olé*, the *compás*, and the superhero. All of this had been simmering inside me since I began to dance, until at some point I said to myself, "Ok, I want to do my own stage investigation and personal investigation." And that pushed me to spend eight months preparing *El arte de la guerra*, my most decisive show, because I had stopped for four years to study and do occasional things wherever they still believed that I was a flamenco dancer.

A COPERNICAN BEFORE AND AFTER: EL ARTE DE LA GUERRA You did this show after taking a reasonable amount of time to solidify those concepts and to start melding your two experiences. What else motivated this piece? It seems like it was motivated by a certain political context. Why did you choose the art of war and not that of love? The show came out after the Twin Towers, the Iraq war, etc. I was deeply moved by a Dutch photographer, Rineke Dijkstra, who worked with an adolescent from when he was entering military school and then left after the Iraq War. There were six photographs, but that sequence impressed me greatly because you saw the transformation of that kid, a concept that I like very much and that still interests me, maybe because I have undergone it, and that is what motivated me. I was also interested in the book *The Art of War*, which talks about strategy, a word that I like a lot, because it implies moving through certain places and proposing others in order to arrive at a certain point or objective, and I think I play with strategies.

EL ARTE DE LA GUERRA (Teaser)

From what I understand, it was a success: it won awards and was received well by critics and by the public. The public had been changing since the late nineties, and they connected with it. My journey has coincided with the education of the public about new approaches. I think that the show was very good because there was electronic music that interested me, flamenco guitar that I was interested in, flamenco *cante* that I wasn't interested in but had to be there, contemporary piano, projections, drawings . . . Although the electronic music had recorded parts, everything was live. It forced them to be aware of what was happening in the space, and it came together, and my body too. [Before the premiere] I was really scared because at that point it was inevitable where I was at, and there was no template for what I was doing, but it worked, and at point there was no turning back. It gave me a passport to continue on. There was a before and an after.

What happened in your field in that lapse between the end of the nineties and 2006 to allow those proposals that had flamenco as their mother tongue but that went in other directions to better reach the public? What factors contributed? It's a long story of the evolution of flamenco dance, but I can sum it up for you. In the seventies, flamenco dance-theater appears, which is a visceral reaction against the Franco régime, and there is a nucleus of artists who want to talk about their specific problems using flamenco. Mario Maya and others discuss the gypsy's situation and repression, and to do that they use flamenco dance-theater. From there to Joaquín Cortés—in him the flamenco body starts to represent a renewal of the Spanish brand, introducing the opportunity to reconfigure the flamenco aesthetic. Carlos Saura's film *Flamenco* comes out, and with it Belén Maya, who represents a new model of woman within flamenco. A woman without an ornamental comb, without ruffles, more androgynous; the exile of Carmen; a woman who works with a metronome, without men at her side making music for her, and that too is a leap forward. The public starts getting used to seeing flamenco from another perspective, not only from the perspective of polka dots and fiestas. Other trends start to emerge, and there's a moment in which contemporary dance comes in as well, as in my case, although for me it was a vital need. I premiered *El arte de la guerra* in Berlin. I don't know what would have happened if it had premiered in Seville. Well, that definitely would have been impossible.

THE FATHER, THE SON, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT Then you began to work on *Al toque*, the first part of a trilogy that is now almost finished What motivated you to initiate such an ambitious project that has been going on for a decade now? I didn't know it was going to last a decade! I had done *Souvenir*, a show with Belén Maya, and there were three of us on stage: she played the *bailaora*, an actor played the *cantaor*, and I was the *guitarrista*. I always say that *Al toque* was like a spin-off of *Souvenir*. When I finished that show I felt the need to delve more deeply into the *guitarrista* part, and with *Al toque*, by creating the trilogy, I put to death my relationship with flamenco. That's my starting point. I talk about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When I finish talking about them, I have a feeling that I will be in another religion [laughter]. In general the shows today that speak about flamenco speak of the privileged position that flamenco history has in today's flamenco, and I am always trying to escape that. I don't talk about the *toque*, the *cante*, or the *baile* as a historical reference. I don't want my value to come from the past. What I was saying to you about the avant-garde, people always grasp at that and mention, say, Vicente Escudero. He already did that [brought modernist aesthetics to flamenco], and his name is used to validate modern forms in flamenco. Again, the damn yardstick, not just

of the past but also of the present-future. I am a contemporary dancer, and for me that translates into creating distance from the referential values of history.

With this trilogy, besides talking about flamenco bodies, I wanted to uncover the body of the *guitarrista*, the *cantaor*, and the *bailaor*. That last one was hardest to find, because it is the one that is most hidden. Now I am happy because I can discuss flamenco from a contemporary mindset, and because I don't feel I am defending flamenco at all. It matters very little to me. I'm not interested in defending it, but I am talking about flamenco, about bodies. I am interested in the body that executes flamenco or that lives within that code, when I manage to visualize it, uncover it, and connect it with things that matter to you. I am trying to unmask flamenco and its aura of authenticity. That aura that distinguishes between belonging and not belonging—it's false.



AL CANTE. Photo: Aida Vargas

What does the metaphor of the astronaut symbolize in *Al cante*? What would the *cante* of an astronaut be like or what would be left of it? Where there is no air, sound cannot be transmitted, and he is tied to the chair, as if symbolizing what the body requires of space, whether the space of a *tablao*, a spaceship, or a theater. Yes, it symbolizes moving flamenco in space and time. Also moving it beyond borders. It seems to me that things are happening beyond borders. And beyond the earth, the closest thing is the moon. That's where the concept of the astronaut came from, where air does not exist. Air is what transmits sound. Without air, the *cantaor* would continue singing. We wouldn't hear him, but we would observe his body and understand that he

is singing flamenco because of his gestures, because we have some knowledge of this. That's it on the one hand. On the other hand, it's moving him in space, transporting him to the universe, to the moon. Another component was the moon as a metaphor of Romanticism, of the flamenco tradition that employs that recurring system of symbols of the moon, blood, and a dagger. This show came about by means of a proposal that I was made in Gerona to do Lorca's poems. I saw right away that it had to be an astronaut, because Lorca was speaking of the moon, but the people who can speak of the moon with certainty are those who have been there, and as of now, astronauts are the ones who have been there. Since I don't believe in Lorca when he talks about the moon at a Romantic level, which it

seems to me is the worst that has been transmitted to flamenco, it seemed appropriate to me to talk about the Romanticism of the moon.

Those three layers are the starting point of *Al cante*: above all, the body of the astronaut, the question of vibration, and the question of gravity. It moves me to think about *Al cante*. It makes me feel proud to have been able to bring a *cantaor* to my space under my influence who uses his body as the main source of emission, something that I had sought for some time. We are talking about our dear friend Paco [Niño de Elche].

How did you meet him? What struck you the most the first time you met him? The VaconBacon show. Raúl Cantizano told me about it and I saw it. I was the first person to improvise with Paco at the corporal level, and I remember the day exactly. I realized that what I had imagined and desired for many years, because I had stopped working with the *cante*, was actually happening. It was his body—how he would use his body to emit his voice and *cante*. How he positioned his body as the initial state for the emission of the *cante* impressed me even more than his thought and discourse.

Are you referring to his physical gestures, to how he utilized his body as a tool of sound? Paco first puts forward his body for the emission of sounds, but he does not emit sound, and he observes the body—its symbols, its expressions, its relationship with space, and with the self and the other. Which—well, sometimes it is very mannered because his original formation was as a *cantaor*, and that comes out. We touched on this a lot in the research process, and I observed how much formality there is in his body. In the research process, I wanted to know how inevitable it was that some gestures would be maintained in order to emit sound. With Paco there is no problem because he can observe himself as an investigator as well, and that doesn't stop him. On the contrary, he observes how he becomes the subject of the study, and how I was able to work with his body as the subject of the study, because he can observe himself from the outside even though he is inside. What interested me about him was how he would position his body as a tool.

Why do you think your rejection of the *cante* is so strong? Because I'm not interested in what they reduce the body to. They don't work with it. They work with the voice, and to me limiting the *cante* to the voice seems like a waste of time and opportunity.

His voice is also capable of reaching stratospheric, almost non-musical registers. The concreteness of the theme of space and moon was very hard for him. He was afraid of something so concrete. With David Montero, the playwright, the three of us were able to come to an understanding. For me, the lyrics are very important in flamenco. Since I don't identify with practically any of them, I seek out those which speak of what is universal in human beings . . . In *Souvenir*, I told David, who helped me with the lyrics, to tell the *cantaora* that I didn't want any flamenco lyrics about romantic relationships. They helped me, and we found lyrics that talked about being human, and then and there I said to myself, "Here, yes, I find myself," and "Here, yes."

Why don't you like the lyrics that talk about love? Because they speak of love from a sexist, heteronormative position.

So, the history of your relationship with flamenco is a curious one, no? Is this unease with flamenco lyrics about love a recent feeling? No, I have always felt that.

So, of course, you liked the act of dancing more than the lyrics. I didn't listen to the lyrics. Everything changed when I needed to listen to them in order to dance. I needed an appropriate discourse, and for me it was difficult to accept those lyrics.

You would dance without listening to the lyrics, just the *compás*! As far as I can tell, most flamenco dancers do this.

Oh, really? The *bailaores* too? But why? Does it throw them off? Yes, yes. I don't know, probably they weren't really that important, since the expression was already defined, and you already knew if they were about sadness or happiness. . .

Gesture was more important than what the lyrics might say. Of course. You just have to look at the *copla*, right? If you watch people singing *copla*, they go beyond the lyrics. The gesture gets ahead. It's like a telenovela actor who gets ahead of the text.

Damn, that's crazy! [Laughs] Of course, that's where the whole concept of playback came from in *Al cante*.

Why do you believe that the dancing body is the hardest component [of the Holy Trinity]? [Thinks] Because the *toque* and the *cante* let me see what the person is like, because there are lapses where you can glimpse their everyday movement. Dance, the part that works directly with the body and with the *cante* as well, and educates it—for me this is what is most difficult.

Maybe because you don't have enough distance from it to . . . Maybe. For now, I have had to go where I didn't want to go, to the history of flamenco. Looking at what the late nineteenth-century Romantics wrote about the dance they saw when they came to Spain, I have formed a hypothesis that what they were referring to were the bodies I see now in non-flamenco bodies when they dance flamenco—with their imperfection, their rawness, their distance from flamenco aesthetics. I believe that the Romantic *guiri* [foreigner] refers to the outsider who dances flamenco. My hypothesis is that what the Romantics saw back then resembles what we see now when we watch an outsider—someone unfamiliar with flamenco's corporal language—dancing flamenco.

That is, they would see a flamenco show, and they would write their individual accounts of what was evoked in them by that show they didn't know anything about. Of course, and they talked about that in relation to Spain. They were travel books.

And then, as you say, somehow an imaginary world began to develop, along with some adjectives that with time became in some way imperative, with rules, even for the performer whom they had described. Of course, exactly. We turned into what they had described.

Do you think that these Romantic writers or others who wrote about flamenco influenced which gestures became established characteristics of flamenco? In some aspects, yes. Besides, it's normal. What they see from outside is what is valid, because that is what is going to bring you money and make them love you. Then, since flamenco has a great need for recognition both in an economic sense and a verbal sense . . . I don't know how to say it, but it goes together very well. It's like, "Tell me what you like the best, and I'll do it for you."

What are the clichés? Machismo, strength, submission, living passionately, suffering, and life in the country. There's more . . .

That is, the *arrebato*, the *quejío*, you think that these structures ended up arriving in certain imaginary worlds due to this phenomenon of foreignness. Surely it would have been different in the nineteenth century. How different could it be before reading these accounts and after reading them—when you are conscious of the stereotypes and you perform them?

I don't know. I'm not interested in discovering or seeing what they were like. History is invented. What is clear is that there are some books out there that represent the Romantic writers who came to Spain, although they might as well have been brought here by extraterrestrials. Since it was before there were any references to flamenco in paintings, there is no one who can tell us directly, so the only thing I can do is come up with hypotheses that feed my creativity. My hypothesis is that what the Romantic writers described is like how someone might dance today who doesn't know how to dance flamenco according to the academies.

TOCABA (Teaser)

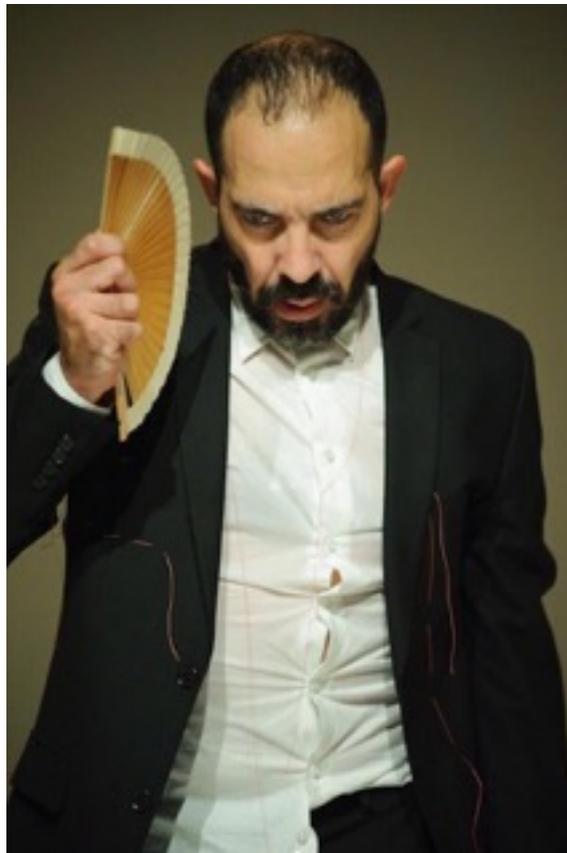
FLAMENCO EMPÍRICO You work with the concept of Empirical Flamenco. Can you explain what it consists of? It began as a commission for Mercat de les Flors. I created a cycle that contained my philosophy about flamenco and the bodies that emit and receive it, and I presented the cycle as *Flamenco Empírico*. Why? It seemed to me that it connected with what I had been doing in recent years, not having a point of reference and developing myself based on my own experience. I always thought that there were some performers whose relationship with flamenco was based on the empirical, without references to the history of flamenco. Now, with time, I have figured out that I should be talking about something that has to do with pedagogy, with a method. I am getting the courage to give it that name because there is something empirical about pedagogy. I don't want to transmit something fixed, but rather a methodology that remains open to the body and its expressive needs.

Empirical flamenco is opening up more and more. In the United States they have proposed that I do the cycle there. It would be a great opportunity, because here it was positioned in Europe; there it would be situated on the American continent. There are many artists working there, and I would like to get them together. Again, we see the foreign gaze upon flamenco—what I was telling you before about the Romantic era. I still think that the most interesting developments in flamenco come from people who are outside of flamenco and of the concept of flamenco as a national heritage.

In this cycle, which you were organizing for five years, there were people of diverse backgrounds: Canada, Greece . . . What did these new perspectives bring to a practice like flamenco? The case of the foreigner is interesting. I ran into performers who had fallen out of love with flamenco, and this always seemed very interesting to me, because they had gotten lost, and they realized that they had to reconnect with their culture and their experience in order to continue. Many foreign performers came who were married to the empirical concept, which wasn't only for the artists, but also for the audience. We found new methods for transmission. For example, I changed the position from which the audience sees the production. Now it wasn't frontal, but four-sided, which caused the audience to interact with the audience members across from them, and the dancer eliminated frontal flamenco and could work in 360 degrees, which dethroned the image of the *cantaor* and the *guitarrista*, because traditionally there are never audience members behind them.

It's moving the space of flamenco, in every sense. The public sometimes sees my artistic projects and says, "I've accepted flamenco as something that can belong to me." And I like that.

Do you think that the myth of purity, the contrast between "authentic" gypsy flamenco and non-gypsy, tourist flamenco, has been harmful? I have been a dual subject all of my life, because I was born in Germany and I lived in Spain; my father was a gypsy and my mother was not. This has proven to me that the concept of purity has been used as a political tool, and its use has been quite unfortunate. When flamenco is institutionalized, the gypsy is displaced and stereotyped. The gypsy presence is stylized and contained. The political-economic mechanisms of flamenco use the references and adjust them according to their interests. At one stage the gypsy was useful to represent a series of social values that were focused on social integration, but now people don't talk as much about gypsy flamenco or gypsy soul or gypsy passion. It wasn't until the nineties, when the new flamenco films came out; now I don't see it as particularly related, and when it is used it's a bit old-fashioned.



Bailografía. Photo: Paco Villalta

IMPROVISATION AND THE STRAITJACKET OF GENDER **What abilities must come together in order to be a good improviser of flamenco?** In flamenco in general, improvisation has a different meaning from the way I understand it in my context. In flamenco, improvisation is carried out on the basis of previously established rules, revolving around certain pivot points that are always in sync. So the leap from one to the other is not so great that you can really call it improvisation. It has rules, a scene, and a script that is quite established. And I think it's a malformation in the study of flamenco to learn these norms and then to say that you are improvising. "Free" improvisation is also

questionable. It's not so free. What happens is that the pivots you work with are farther away from each other every time. I prefer to speak of improvisation with separated pivots rather than free improvisation.

Which pivots are needed to be a good improviser in your field? A wealth of rhythms, not the *compás*. The *compás* is not part of my concept of improvisation. In my view, improvisation is a question of rhythm and a consciousness of hierarchic rupture, as if flamenco hierarchy did not exist. When you work with *cante*, *guitarra*, and other kinds of instruments, you have to create a hierarchic rupture: they aren't playing for you, and you aren't playing for them. It is a conjunction of those three elements.

You teach classes in improvisation. What are the most basic things that you say to a student in your class? Whew [thinks]. Open your eyes, flex your knees, carry your weight, play with the rhythm, and take pauses.

You try to separate your movements from flamenco orthodoxy in an attempt to put uninhibitedness into practice. Do you think, for example, that the straitjacket of gender is a great inhibition that restrains the dancer from making less regulated or less orthodox movements? Like what you were saying, how there is nothing more imposing than the way they teach you to dance like a man with certain symbolic corporal gestures and structures. Gender itself is the first costume they put on us. The first. Based on your genitals, you are defined by a series of elements as soon as you are born, even from the moment of the ultrasound. Already they are defining you according to a series of patterns. When you grow up, you choose a career, and in the case of flamenco, you are choosing something that is strictly defined as to what it is to dance as a man and dance as a woman. You realize that there is a moment of "Shit, I've learned to dance like a man, beyond what I am, a human being." But I never questioned that until I was older.

When you teach dance, there is a deliberate will to try and escape those stereotypes.

Yes, definitely. I think it's a very important stance. In my opinion, it can't be any other way. Recently I had an important thought. I realized that I had been developing this for a long time— that blurring of gender within the techniques of flamenco. But it's very difficult, because I find that flamenco's very foundational techniques—even though now I am developing my own, Empirical Flamenco—those foundational techniques have many tricky components, so that all of a sudden you realize that you are defining gender. It's a question of force, right? It's like you're being positioned. Right now I am teaching a class where I talk about the flamenco body: the male body and the female body. Since I refuse to talk about the masculine body and the feminine body, I think that talking about the male body and the female body allows me to differentiate. I am finding this in my own practice. You can be a female body with a masculine body, or viceversa.



Juan Carlos L rida & Fernando L pez Rodr guez. Photo: Elia Rodi re

MICROAPPROXIMATIONS AND SELF X-RAYS Your work *Bailograf a* is an attempt at a retrospective of your trajectory. How has it been useful to you? How did it emerge? What elements of analysis has it provided you for your own process? Since the final part of the trilogy is *Al baile*, that path took me next to *Bailograf a* in order to examine myself and my trajectory. The initial "I'm going to throw some pieces together to make an inexpensive show so I can make money and perform" became the seed that grew into *Al baile* and the opportunity to break with that focus on the past. I use this phrase: "I want to project myself from the present toward the future, and not from the past to the future," but I saw that I was creating a show about the past. So I asked myself, "What am I doing? I am being schizophrenic." But then I understood that I am not really talking about the past, but rather making memory present in my body. To dance memory is to act in the present. Improvisation happens in the present, but you use concepts from your memory. I think that sometimes when we use memory in flamenco, we position ourselves in the past, not in the present, and we try to recreate things from the past.

[In *Bailograf a*, the first scene is the day he was born, and from there various moments occur, sometimes planting, sometimes burying, as a metaphor for evolutions and artistic careers, using mechanisms such as moving backwards in order to move forwards or starting at zero because of the opportunities that brings.]

A recurrent theme in your trajectory is the importance of the concept of learning, both as a person and in terms of your body . . . The empirical, transformation, learning—these three things are closely related. Practical experience trains you, and this transforms you. We can see only some aspects of transformation, but I need to see the personal aspect of transformation and what the learning process has been. In my own field, since I am a dancer and I have my own tools, what you say about the learning process, sure, but I can't separate it from the concept of transformation or the empirical concept.

It also has to do with how your body changes as a result of your life experiences. At sixty, you dance differently, beyond your body, because of your empirical knowledge. And that translates into your execution. It can also be a metaphor for your trajectory and the doubts of anyone who develops a

creative act, in the sense that you have to die many times in order to be reborn. The show *El aprendizaje* [The Learning] is based on the story of a person who emerges from a coma, and the period of time in which he begins to feel that his body is coming back to life. He has to relearn what he was previously, and that gives him the opportunity to let go of certain things and to relearn others. For me it was deeply connected with how I see flamenco in my body. The director always said to me, it's like you are in bed, in a coma, and you wake up, and there is a moment when you start to do this [popping sounds], and you don't know why, but you do it, which requires you to observe it. Bit by bit you realize why you do it. And when you discover why, that knowledge may hurt you, because it is connected with a series of your life's components. You have the opportunity to relearn it, and to me that is beautiful. I think that, thanks to the collaboration of Roberto Romei, this is the show that has transformed my orientation to the stage more than any other.

This is also related to what you say about the intention to break with restrictive definitions of *bailaor*, of . . . Of the labels. I put them in their place. Just now, when I was on my way to the restroom, I felt like a flamenco dancer.

Why? I think that what I have been talking about represents me as a flamenco dancer. And I was thinking that someone might say to me, "No, you're not a flamenco dancer," and I would ask, "Why not?" in order to force that person to define what they consider flamenco to be. Then we would start to see ideological concepts that would reveal who that person really was. And then we would say, "How nicely they have opened up." That's why right now I feel like a flamenco dancer, because I know that my feeling that way causes controversy, and this controversy is meaningful and productive. These days talking with someone about flamenco reveals a lot about their character. I really like to do this. Especially with people who are not involved in flamenco. Because I scratch a bit, and right under the surface I find traditionalism, the most conservative political side.

There is a respect for tradition that is not found as much with jazz or salsa. There is more respect. It's almost like, "You shall not use the Lord's name in vain." Of course, and I can use it vain because I belonged to it, or I still belong to it, and that validates me, as I was thinking just now when I went to the restroom. Sometimes I am a flamenco dancer, and sometimes I am ex-flamenco.



SOUVENIR. Belén Maya & David Montero & Juan Carlos Lériða. Photo: Klaus Handner

There's an aura to the field, with a focus that you don't get when you talk about cumbia, polkas, European classical music, Gamelan. You cannot interview a flamenco *bailaor* without knowing flamenco's history. Of course, but someone might tell you that you are not interviewing a real flamenco *bailaor*. Or in the case of Paco, that he is not a true *cantaor*. So in some sense you reporters are validating us as flamenco performers, while from within the flamenco context we are not validated. And that's good, because it will create a diversified discourse. That's why I like to talk to the “modern” people in flamenco.

Because when I do, they unmask themselves on their own. This traditionalist or conservative aspect emerges in people where you're like, "What???"

What do you mean by the "modern" people?

There are a noticeable number of reporters who now understand how interesting flamenco is because it's coming from Juan Carlos Lériða or Niño de Elche. When you first listen to them, they may amaze you, but a moment comes when you make a couple of observations and this view comes out. That's why I believe that contemporary thought is different. Everything that has happened—the way they have written about Rocío Márquez, Niño de Elche, Morente, Soleá Morente—in the end, they end up saying almost the same thing as the purists about the most traditional things. It's as if in discussing flamenco, flamenco ends up winning the battle against them and capturing them; it doesn't let them have their own thoughts. I think that you have to have an opinion about flamenco, even if you don't understand it. You have to have an opinion. I think that wisdom is knowing that flamenco is no more special than other models. Everyone has the capacity to form an opinion. That's why when I hear, "I don't understand flamenco," I say, "Ok, and . . . ? And what else?" To make an idea visible and make it grow, it seems to me that it is important to express your opinion with awareness and commitment. Because the discourse that comes from the purists is not helpful for me anymore, and the discourse of these modern artists isn't either. It isn't. Like what they are writing about Rocío Márquez, Niño de Elche, or even Israel Galván, it's not helpful. It seems to me just as hideous as the purist discourse. They are grabbing onto models to define this, and they are not connecting with "what do you think," beyond the words *nuevo flamenco* and the comparisons with Morente. They

always make comparisons. What can you say without them? Sometimes you have to do it because it is inevitable, but you have to ask yourself what it would be like without them.

You dare to do that because it's these people and not, for example, Habichuela. I wish they would risk it. Then for me it would be valid. When you have an opinion about this sixty-year-old person who is doing something that you know how to connect with your thought and your sensations, talk about that too. Especially because you have the ability to do it and the intelligence to understand where they're at. I project it toward what I would like to happen. Because otherwise, you always talk about flamenco with a respect and foolishness that makes me think, "Dude, what are you talking about?" You develop tics and taglines, like right now, and sooner or later it turns into purism again. Because now all of the references would be Niño de Elche, Israel Galván, and Rocío Márquez, because they are the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Father.

Like it used to be Camarón, Morente . . . Or Carmen Linares and Mario Maya. Again, they are going to make it impossible for new people coming up to have any visibility or individuality. Because the comparison will be screwed up. It's as if they begin to compare my work with new people's, and they say, "They are doing Lérída-style dance?" No! Talk about that. Talk about that. Sometimes I am intransigent.

To wrap up, it's clear what clichés you wanted to break with in *Al cante*, but which were the ones you wanted to break in *Al toque*? You played with the guitar, you pretended it was a penis, you used it as a decoration, you posed with it like a rock star . . . In *Al toque* I did not yet have confidence in the bodies that I was presented with, and I wasn't very prepared. Raúl Cantizano entered in the second part, so I did the first part with Marta Robles and José Luis Rodríguez, a great musician, but contained. He could create different sounds and different rhythmic tempos, but he got his body involved under my direction. I stressed the instrument itself a great deal, how to play it or how to position it like a body on the stage. I eliminated the prosthesis of the *guitarrista*. For example, I would transform the body of the *guitarrista* into my body or sometimes I would turn into the guitar. And the guitar too would be converted into an object beyond that of the instrument, so that sometimes it was a Christmas tree, or a dead body, or a penis, or a woman, or an anus. I turned the prosthesis into a body.

Have you noticed much difference in the work's reception depending on where you present it? In Barcelona it has been gaining an audience, but they always offered me that possibility there. In Madrid the reception is horrible. We are not on the same wavelength. I blame it on certain practices in the dramatic arts and specifically regarding Spanish dance, which I am not artistically in tune to at the moment. In Germany it has always gone very well. I always have more impact outside of Spain. It is progressive. I have more in Barcelona than in Seville, and more in Germany than in Barcelona. Perhaps the moon will be next! There is a *soleá* lyric that says "In Valencia I was French, in France I was Valencian, in Seville I was Aragonese, and in Aragon I was Sevillian."

UPCOMING PROJECTS One of Lérída's upcoming projects is with the young *bailarín/bailaor* Fernando López Rodríguez. "Finding him was very important. Since we are from two different generations, I discovered a lot about our flamenco bodies and about the multiple bodies that live in me. Together we have been able to find a common discourse about what is queer in flamenco and to use it as an instrument for talking about identity and difference. Now we are planning theater

projects, performances, and conferences under the name *Transgernational* to open up a space for debate about gender identity, national identity, and sexual identity, etc.," he explains.

Although, of course, right now L rida is longing to finalize *Al baile*, which is scheduled to open in Barcelona in October². "It's been difficult because I am not focused. I have a lot of projects going on. But there is an image from what I was telling you about Romanticism that is really motivating me: there is a tree (that's me), a Romantic seated at his feet, and a foreigner dancing across from them. Many times the difficult thing is to channel the creative act, but when you find the spot, off you go. And I always need more time."

² Finally released in Barcelona. [October 21, 2016](#).