**Mercé y Luque, Antonia Rosa (Stage Name: La Argentina; b. 4 September 1888, Buenos Aires, Argentina; d. 18 July 1936, Bayonne, France)**

**Summary**

Antonia Rosa Mercé y Luque, known by her stage name *La Argentina*, was the most celebrated Spanish dancer of the early twentieth century. Greatly influenced by the modernist productions of the Ballets Russes who sought political refuge in neutral Spain during the First World War, *La Argentina* fused the modernism of the Spanish School of Music to the *Escuela Bolera*, or Spanish Bolero School of classical dance, adding many rhythmic and choreographic stylizations from Romani flamenco and other complex regional styles of folk dance she had learned on ethnographic trips throughout Spain. This hybrid vision resulted in a polyrhythmic, African and Hispano-Arab-Sephardic fusion of musical and choreographic cultures whose artistic influence can still be felt along the Iberian Peninsula. With this rich and varied musical and choreographic vocabulary, and a full company of Romani, Spanish and European dancers and musicians, *La Argentina* took Europe, the Americas and Asia by storm. Between her first tour to New York in 1915 and her final European performances in 1936, she introduced and cultivated global audiences by performing, touring, writing, publishing and giving afternoon lectures on the subject of the Spanish dance,

**Training and Early Career**

*La Argentina*’s mother had been a premiere danseuse at Madrid’s Teatro Real and her father was its principal ballet master. Trained by her father from age four, *La Argentina* joined the Teatro Real when she was nine years old and was appointed premiere danseuse by the age of eleven. She studied music and dance at the Conservatory in Madrid and graduated to become one of the leading exponents of dance as a modernist form of expression. No doubt influenced by the global modernist movement in painting, music, literature and dance, *La Argentina*, an intellectual and theorist of dance, revolutionized dance in Spain and throughout Europe by evolving an entirely new way of dancing. Associating each Spanish style and school of dance with each other, she built a choreographic vocabulary rich in folkloric and modernist sensibility. Her short and evening-length works for the stage told many kinds of stories and became a kind of mobile historical archive of Spain and Spanish cultural tradition that reached geographically from Galicia to Andalusia and Muslim to Christian Spain. Most significantly, *La Argentina* told the stories of women, rich and poor, using the richness of her choreographic vision to construct images of women as intellectual beings.

**Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Antonia Rosa Mercé y Luque – *La Argentina* – was the most celebrated Spanish dancer of the early twentieth century. She achieved international fame as a Spanish dance artist, catching the eye of a sophisticated and critical dance and musical press throughout Europe and the Americas. Between 1915, when she premiered a program of nineteen solo dances in New York City to an afternoon ladies’ luncheon, and her premature death to rheumatic heart disease in 1936, she had toured the world nine times. She and her company, Les Ballets Espagnols (1925-1936), had become so famous that the press often waited at the dock for their arrival.

Riding a global vogue for Spanish-Romani dance artists that surfaced throughout Europe in the mid-to-late nineteenth-century in singing cafés – *cafés cantantes* – and vaudeville theatres, she achieved artistic stature early in her career with her novel, modernist vision of Spanish dance as inclusive of all the dance cultures of Spain: *La Escuela Bolera*, or Spanish Classical School of dance taught at the Teatro Real de Madrid and the Musical Conservatory; flamenco and castanet-playing learned first-hand from dancers in Andalusia and castanet masters at the Academia del Baile in Seville; and the hundreds of folk dances learned from Spanish farmers, day labourers and the working poor. Wherever she toured, she travelled out into the fields or small villages to learn regional dances.

A virtuosa of the castanets (she owned one hundred pairs whose wood she hand-picked from California’s redwood forests), an orchestral director, composer, dancer and choreographer, *La Argentina* founded the first modern Spanish dance company, Les Ballets Espagnols, in Paris in 1925. With a group of twenty-five Spanish and Romani dancers and musicians who played musical interludes between short solos or full-length works, Les Ballets Espagnols presented a varied program of Romani-infused Spanish dances in the form of male and female solos, duets and full company dance-theatre works whose inspiration was drawn from the new musical scores of Manuel de Falla, Ernesto Halffter, Gustavo Duran, Isaac Albeníz and Enrique Granados.

Greatly influenced by the scenic design by and modernist choreographic palette of the Ballets Russes who sought political refuge in neutral Spain during the First World War, *La Argentina* fused the modernism of the Spanish School of Music to the Escuela Bolera, adding rhythmic and choreographic stylizations from *flamenco puro* and other musically complex regional styles of folk dance. This syncretic vision, opened her primary vocabulary of Spanish Classical dance to a polyrhythmic, African and Hispano-Arab-Sephardic fusion of musical and choreographic cultures whose artistic lineage can still be felt the Iberian Peninsula. With this rich and varied musical and choreographic vocabulary and a full company of Romani, Spanish and European dancers and musicians, *La Argentina* took Europe and the world by storm. Her 1920s and 1930s collaborations with modernist scenic designer, Nestor de la Torre of the Canary Islands, brought Les Ballets Espagnols’ repertory a modernist look and feel in which the dancing body became but one piece of the overall design of the work.

Unlike the neo-primitivist modernism being generated by her literary and artistic compatriots – Manuel de Fall, Federico García Lorca, Ortega y Gasset, José Bergamín and Jacinto Benavente – *La Argentina*’s interest in Romani song and dance as by no means an attempt to ‘save’ Romani art from commercialism and extinction. Rather, her ethnographic fieldwork in the Romani pueblos throughout southern Spain was conducted from the kinesthetic approach of any dance artist: to master the dance in order to perform it, not to save it.

In every aspect of her artistic life, *La Argentina* strove to develop a choreographic language of the body that opened new ways of seeing the Spanish female dancer in public space; no longer was she mere entertainment in vaudeville houses but, like the natural, free style of Isadora Duncan, a contemporary of the Spanish dancer, *La Argentina*’s female characters and choreographic language produced a feminist folklore, opening new ways of training and viewing women in public space.

In July 1936, five years after receiving medals of honour from both France and Spain for her cultural contributions to both countries, *La Argentina* was invited by the President of Spain to create a National School of Dance that would have been attached to the National Theatre. Had she lived, her populist vision of Spanish dance as an historical archive of the dance histories of Spain, might have come to pass and her legacy as a Spanish feminist modern dance and music artist would be better known today.

**Further Reading**

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