**Escudero, Vicente (b. 27 October, 1892, Vallodolid, Spain; d. 4 December 1980, Barcelona, Spain)**

**Summary**

Vicente Escudero was a multi-talented artist. There is no question that the great *bailaor*, Antonio el de Bilbao, whom he met on a tour of Andalusia and Portugal, had a lasting influence on Escudero, as did modernist dance-theater of *La Argentina*, the Ballets Russes, and the visual art revolution. He even became a close friend of the modern master, Pablo Picasso. Between 1920 and his debut as a concert dancer in 1927, Escudero honed his craft and his choreography, learning to dance longer works of dance in the *cafés cantantes* of Madrid. Escudero was particularly known for his famous *Farruca* solo, and for his performances with Carmita Garcia, who would become his lifelong partner. Dancing on a concert stage, Escudero was received by critics like André Levinson, who wrote seriously about his work as a dancer and a choreographer.

**Early Life and Career**

Vicente Escudero, world-renowned *bailaor*, flamenco choreographer and academician, modernist painter, writer, master teacher, and artistic director of his own company, was born into an impoverished Romani family in Valladolid, Spain on October 27, 1892. The son of a Spanish father and Romani mother from the Sacromonte, Escudero began dancing as soon as he could walk. At the age of nine, his parents moved to the Sacromonte, hilltop caves above the city of Granada. There, he learned to dance flamenco, as well as *toque* (guitar), *palmas* (clapping) and quickly joined a group of children, dancing on street corners for whatever change he managed to bring home to his impoverished family. He invented a way of using his fingernails to tap out rhythms on the ground or a nearby chair and, decades later, incorporated fingernails as a percussive instrument into one of his most famous solos, *Rhythms*.

At the age of twelve, Escudero left home, becoming an itinerant flamenco dancer, hopping trains (unable to pay the fare) and wagons in the hope of earning a living. Dancing at county fairs and on street corners, Escudero worked his way from village to village, beaten by police and learning flamenco *cante*, or song along the way. Finally, he arrived in Madrid and was fortunate to become a member of a *cuadro flamenco*, or flamenco group, dancing nightly in vaudeville theatres, cinemas and *café cantantes*, or nightclubs, popular throughout Europe in the early twentieth century.

**Contributions to the Field and Modernism**

In 1919, Escudero met the great flamenco dancer, Antonio el de Bilbao, while appearing at the café Las Columnas. Bilbao invited Escudero to join his company in Lisbon. It was with Bilbao that Escudero became aware of the issue of masculinity and attack in *flamenco puro* – the pure Romani flamenco style of male dancers. By 1920, Escudero made his way to Paris where he debuted at the Olympia. There he met Carmita Garcia, a dancer from the Gran Teatro del Liceo in Barcelona, who would become his lifelong stage partner. In 1922, Escudero premiered his first concert work at a musical hall, the Salle Gaveau. Luckily, the Russian art critic, André Levinson was present and began to write about his work as original. Levinson saw in Escudero a modernist plastique, a novel approach to the flamenco style in which form – what would become Escudero’s *Decalogue* – triumphed over content.

From the Salle Gaveau, Escudero began touring Europe, enlarging his flamenco repertoire through the influence of already established dancers like *La Argentina*. He premiered full-length works, such as the 1930 *Bailes de Vanguardia* and even caught the attention of Anna Pavlova who invited him to partner her on a North American tour the following year. Unfortunately, Pavlova died in 1931 and the two never danced together.

Escudero debuted in New York City on January 17, 1932, with Carmita and Carmela Garcia as his partners. His repertoire included solo and group dances, as well as longer works of dance-theatre: *Alegrías, El Garrotín, Tango* and *Farruca*, each accompanied by guitar. Following in the footsteps of La Argentina, Escudero also danced Isaac Albeníz’s *Cordoba, Zapateado, Seguidillas* and *Seville*, as well as *Asturias* by Romero, *Jota Huesca* by Enrique Granados*, The Miller’s Dance* from Manuel de Falla’s *Le Tricorne* and *The Dance of Terror* from *El Amor Brujo*.

Escudero became famous for his rhythmic improvisations, his frequent a capella dancing, his long footwork solos, clapping hands, snapping fingers and use of his fingernails against the wood of a chair or even the floor. Escudero, who became a close friend of the modern master, Pablo Picasso, also painted backdrops for his concerts that espoused abstracted, at times, cubist cityscape or non-representational figures dancing.

While Escudero’s choreographic palette was focused primarily on pure flamenco dances, in Paris, he expanded his repertoire to include theatricalized versions of these dances, influenced as he was by *La Argentina* and the modernist world of art.

Throughout his life, the focus of his dancing remained on his *zapateado*, or his footwork, but expanded to include the use of the full body in relation to a partner in time and space. A ‘dancer’s dancer’, Escudero opened many doors for male flamenco dancers by showing the physical and intellectual power of flamenco in a way previously unseen. In this way, Escudero opened the door for future interpreters to demonstrate that flamenco’s focus on line and form actually espoused modernist principles as deeply as Martha Graham’s *Lamentation.* The outline of the *bailaor’s* outstretched arms and hands, the geometric shapes he makes with his figure, absent of mannerism, all contributed to the Parisian art world’s modernist sensibility. Escudero’s dancing made clear flamenco’s place in the modernist canon of form and content over character and sensuality.

Escudero was also extremely concerned by what he considered to be the bastardization of Romani and other ‘folk’ forms of Spanish dancing in the early-to-mid twentieth-century. Escudero saw evidence of the fall of the Spanish dance in what he termed the ‘decline of the male dancer’, as the result of industrialization and the movement by flamenco dancers to commercialize the forms in music halls as a way to make a living. In reaction, Escudero wrote *Decalogue* in which he articulated ten commandments for the *bailaor*, themale flamenco dancers. It reads like a treatise on masculinity and reveals Escudero’s deeply felt concern that male dancing was being feminized by the addition of a stylized ‘female’ use of the hands, wrists, fingers and arms, as well as reflected in costume and props. Escudero hoped his *Decalogue* would become *the* guide back to traditional male dancing. He points to several male dancers whose flamenco dancing embodies his manifesto on modernist masculinity: Miracielos, the Raspao, Enrique el Jorabao, Lamparilla, Joaquin el Feo, Antonio de Bilbao, Juan el Estampio and Antonio Viruta. Each man, according to Escudero, dances the rules of this Decalogue in which the *bailaor* literally dances his masculinity without commercial stylization or loss of the pure flamenco tradition of improvisation and attention to rhythm. The essence of Escudero’s *Decalogue*, to a certain extent his most enduring legacy, is as follows:

1. Sobriety
2. Dance like a man
3. Turn the wrists from inside out with fingers pointed
4. Hips still
5. Dance with stability and calmness
6. Harmony of feet and head
7. Esthetic and plastic without complications
8. Style and accent
9. Dance with traditional costume
10. To obtain variety of sound with the heart – without caps on the shoes, without false scenery and without other accessories.

Escudero also wrote an autobiography, *Mi baile*, published in 1947, in which he attempts to explain the history of Romani flamenco by distinguishing the Romani *Seguiríya* from the Spanish *Seguidilla*. For Escudero, the Romani *Seguiríya* is clear from its purity, sobriety and style of dancing. A ‘Spanish man’, Escudero argued, had to display these three characteristics in his dancing.

**Ninotchka Devorah Bennahum**

**Further Reading**

Bennahum, N. (2000) *Antonia Mercé, ‘La Argentina’: Flamenco & the Spanish Avant-Garde.* Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2000.

Escudero, V. (1947) *Mi baile*. Barcelona: Montaner y Simon.

---. (1952) ‘Les Lois du Flamenco’, *Révue choreographique de Paris*: 7 – 9.

---. (1937) ‘The Spanish Dance’, *The Dancing Times* (July): 463 – 464.

---. (1955) ‘What is the Flamenco Dance’, *Dance Magazine* (October): 18 – 21.

Levinson, A. (1925) ‘The Spirit of the Spanish Dance’, *Theater Arts* (May): 307 – 320.

Martin, J. (1932) ‘Escudero, Dancer in American Debut’, *The New York Times*

(18 January).