

# PREVIEW

## Pena Brings Flamenco's Footwork & Flair To McCarter

by Barbara Figge Fox

**A**sk any Spanish dancer, and they'll rave about Paco Pena. What makes this company remarkable: its leader is not a dancer, but a musician, and a technically brilliant one at that. For the sake of flamenco he offers his considerable musical expertise to the dancers, the singers, and the other musicians.

"His company is exquisite, among the very best," says Alma Concepcion. Honored last year for decades of teaching Spanish dance and ballet at Princeton Ballet School, Concepcion says that Paco Pena is "an extraordinary, inspiring musician whom I admire profoundly. He is a master guitarist, composer and mentor, whose innovations have expanded the horizon of flamenco and yet retained its essence. He does not center on himself, allowing his remarkable dancers, singers and guitarists to excel."

Paco Pena brings three dancers, three singers, a percussionist, and two other guitarists to perform *Flamenco Vivo* on Saturday, January 26, at 7:30 p.m. at McCarter Theater. The show travels to Newark's NJ-PAC on Sunday, January 27, at 3 p.m.

In this program Pena limits himself to one solo plus a duet with a dancer who, for this number, does not dance but plays the castanets. Speaking by phone from his London home, he says, "I want each individual to be someone who the audience recognizes and 'takes home,' each to have their moment to express separately what they can do."

Such respect and cooperation goes straight to the roots of flamenco, with the singer improvising within a complicated rhythmic structure, the guitarist embellishing and supporting the singer, and the dancer interpreting both. "If you belong in the flamenco culture, nothing is isolated," Pena says. He notes that flamenco has its roots as far back as the ancient Phoenicians, Romans, and Moors. It has elements of Indian dance, of Jewish chants, and African rhythms. Flamenco emerged from the gypsies in the Andalusia region of Spain; historians find it in private homes in the late 18th century and in performance spaces in the 19th century.

Pena grew up in flamenco's native land, Cordoba. His father, whom he describes as a free spirit, was always fruitlessly chasing some new enterprise or invention. His mother, who grew up working in the fields, had to support the family with her vegetable store.

It was a big family—seven girls and two boys. Like many of the poor they lived in a house with other families, but the house was filled with music. Everyone sang, including his sisters and especially his mother. "She was so happy and so colorful and loved by everybody. She single-handedly brought us up and made our life better. She just loved her nine children to death," he says.

His brother taught him to play the guitar when he was six years old. By age 12 he was giving concerts. Soon he moved to London, where he began to stretch boundaries with staged dramas (at Sadler's Wells), collaborations with musicians and dancers from other countries (he just finished a joint production with dancers from Senegal) and ambitious musical projects, such as a flamenco mass. He and his wife live in London; they have a two-year-old grandchild. One of their two daughters designs the lighting and the other is the company manager.

"Basically, I am trying to say this is flamenco," says Pena, with a gentle, British inflection. "If you approach flamenco with honesty and respect, you are immersing yourself in a profound culture that takes you right to the center of the earth. When you stamp your feet, you are almost electrically



connected to the soil. The whole culture of flamenco comments on how we are a product of the earth—how we express our precarious condition, our humanity, our feeling."

Some flamenco songs, such as the "Milonza" on the McCarter program, can sound lighthearted, but they have an undertone of despair. In the fandango the singer leans into the quarter tones ("bending" the space between a D sharp and an E flat, for instance), leading to frequent comparisons with the American blues. But in another song, the darker "Cante Jondo," the elemental cry may segue into a guttural, primal scream. Flamenco is a protest, Pena explains. It is not the same as the fado of Spain's neighbor, Portugal. "Fado is much more sentimental, whereas the flamenco singer rebels. Fado doesn't rebel against anybody—it wonders why."

All this drama and emotion plays out within rigid and complicated rhythmic structures. Some of the folk dances are in familiar Western meters, 2/4 and 3/4, but many are set to a complicated pattern of accents and upbeats in 12-count patterns.

Don't worry about the meter, says Pena. Don't worry about which parts of flamenco are Arabic or African or about what a particular song means. "What I would love is for the audience to open themselves to just be moved. Flamenco is my vehicle with which I like to connect with people. It is my life blood. If someone is open, that is the only thing I expect."

### Lisa Botalico

**'F**lamenco breathes life into your life," says Lisa Botalico, flamenco dance artist and teacher, explaining what performing means to her. "It allows you to express yourself as an individual, so completely. What more could you ask for, to have an audience asking you just to be you, to express the emotions and feelings that you have at that very moment in time."

Botalico is principal dancer and co-artistic director of the Alborada Spanish Dance Theater, the only area flamenco troupe, which will perform on Sunday, February 24, in Asbury and on Sunday, March 10, in South River. Call 848-203-3420. Malaga Restaurant in Trenton also schedules monthly flamenco evenings. Call 609-396-8878.

Botalico grew up in Manhattan, where her father was a printer. She took ballet and tap but, "the minute that I saw flamenco, it washed over me," she remembers. She studied ballet at the Joffrey School and danced with three flamenco companies. She and her husband, a musician, have a grown son, and when they moved to Princeton in 2000, she began to teach children and adults at the Arts Council of Princeton. She also teaches adult classes at the Dance Corner and Princeton Dance and Theater Studio. "Flamenco embraces all sizes and shapes; you need only to have passion and rhythm," she says. One of her former students was so dedicated that she moved to Spain to pursue a flamenco career.

So many different ethnic elements can be found in the union of voice, movement, percussion, and guitar. "When you listen to a Sephardic chant or a Jewish traditional chant—it is flamenco," says Botalico. The swaying hips of the flamenco dancer, she says, come from the Moorish part of Africa. "The lighter rhythms, the rumbas, are from the New World."

Each of these elements has been transformed, probably by the gypsies in Andalusia, into what is uniquely flamenco. Though undulating hand movements resemble those of Indian Bharata Natyam dancers, flamenco hands express emotion and do not tell a story. The "zapateado," rhythmic footwork, echoes Irish step dancing—and Celts occupied the Galicia section of northwest Spain. Yet flamenco feet stamp to accented 12-meter rhythms that may have originated in Africa but now are found only in Spain.

All the dances are built on one of the traditional rhythms. Clapped or pounded on the

**Bailamos: Dancers from Paco Pena's company, left, and Lisa Botalico, above.**

table, they will suffice. The singer adds structure and form and holds the main position in this triptych, says Botalico. "The guitar feels what the singer is doing, embellishes and supports the singer, and the dancer interprets those two elements. Nothing is more satisfying or personally expressive as when the three elements comes together and are thinking and working as one. That is heaven. I have had that 'out of body' experience on many occasions, with the Solea, one of the soulful, dark dances of loneliness."

Watch for the technical bravura, the speed of the feet, the sharpness of the turns, she suggests. Enjoy the beautiful costumes and the strong and passionate sound of the movement. Most of all, the audience "needs to allow the motion to wash over them. You don't need a lot of understanding to appreciate flamenco." The singing may seem dark and heavy, but "get past it and have a transcendent experience."

"When Paco Pena plays his guitar, it sounds like four guitars," says Botalico. "He puts that strength and his technique into accompanying the dancers, and he does it with such respect for the dance. To have the dancers on stage while he is accompanying them, with that unbelievably charged sound—it is beyond belief. I take my students everywhere he performs."

**Paco Pena Flamenco Dance, McCarter Theater, 91 University Place, Princeton.** Saturday, January 26, 7:30 p.m. \$20 and up. [www.mccarter.org](http://www.mccarter.org) or 609-258-2787.

**Alborada Spanish Dance Theater, Tablao Flamenco!, Spain Inn II, 1045 Route 173 West, Asbury.** Sunday, February 24, 4 p.m. Spanish cuisine and two sets of Flamenco. Cover charge. 908-479-4084 or [www.spaininn.net](http://www.spaininn.net).

**Alborada Spanish Dance Theater gala, Ferias de Galicia y Sevilla, with the Orensana Club Galician Dancers, Sunday, March 10, 3:30 to 8:30 p.m., RiaMar restaurant, 25 Whitehead Avenue, South River.** \$65. 848-203-3420 or [alboradadance@aol.com](mailto:alboradadance@aol.com).

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