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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Capturing the Power of Flamenco

By Valerie Gladstone

People often fall in love with flamenco, but few as completely as Manhattanite Martin Santangelo. Six years after his introduction to the fiery dance style in 1987, he had moved to Spain and started his own company with his wife — who's also the star.

Their Noche Flamenca troupe returns to New York today for a four-week engagement at the Lucille Lortel Theater in Greenwich Village, where the 39-year-old Santangelo grew up.

After studying acting at New York University, he joined the theater group El Teatro Campesino in San Juan Bautista, Calif., danced a scaled-back flamenco one night when another actor didn't show up for the performance and was instantly transformed. He soon left for Madrid to study with the masters. There he met and married dancer Soledad Barrio, now 36, and in 1993 they established Noche Flamenca.

Ten years later, the company has met with worldwide success. "They're brilliant," says George C. Wolfe, artistic director of the Joseph Papp Public Theater, where the troupe frequently appears. "Soledad is a once-in-a-lifetime performer who combines overwhelming physicality and spirituality."

Santangelo dedicates his new season to women, in tribute to their strength and nurturing qualities. "I'm lucky to be surrounded by women," he says, referring to his wife; their daughters, Gabrielle and Stella; his sisters-in-law; his mother and his mother-in-law. "Particularly, my mother-in-law; I see how strong she has had to be for her family, without the help of a man. It's often a lonely life, full of hardships, but very common in Spain."

Although Santangelo usually includes male dancers in his troupe, this year he selected only women. They will be accompanied by two male guitarists and two male singers. A traditionalist, he has programmed a full complement of classical flamenco: for the dancers, *soleas* and *siguiriyas*, two of the most soulful flamenco styles; and solos for the popular guitarist Jesus Torres and singer Antonio Vizarraga, longtime members of Noche Flamenca. But it is in his piece "Quebrada," which roughly translates as "broken," that his homage becomes clearest. "It shows women trying to make connections with men," he says, "flirting, making themselves appear weaker than they are — but finally, coming to the realization that, no matter what, they are better off alone. The ending is rather brutal. Men are left out of the most important things in life."

As for the advantages of having a four-week run in New York, Santangelo says: "It's much better for performers to have a long stay in a theater. It allows them to grow accustomed to it physically and spatially. It changes everything artistically. The performers feel freer because it becomes their territory, in an animal sense. The improvisations become more improvisational."

Then, he turns to his favorite subject, his wife, whom he calls "Soli."

"I can't believe she's gotten even stronger spiritually as a dancer," he says proudly. "She's blossomed, less frantic, much more expressive. She will go down in history." ■

Valerie Gladstone is a freelance writer.

WHERE&WHEN Noche Flamenca, today through Nov. 30, Lucille Lortel Theater, 121 Christopher St.; 212-239-6200.

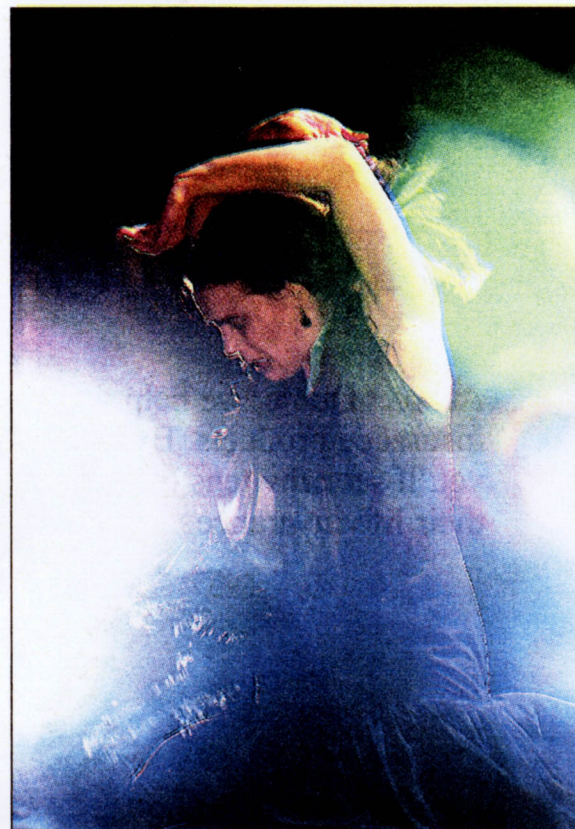


Photo by Farnsworth / Blalock

Noche Flamenca's Soledad Barrio; the troupe comes to Manhattan for a four-week engagement, starting today.