

Masterly encounters

Recorded by: **Lilo Weber**

A flamenco dancer remains a flamenco dancer, and a ballerina remains a ballerina. Can they really come together to create something new? The choreographer Brigitta Luisa Merki is opening up flamenco to all kinds of styles from across the realms of dance, music and art – and she's offering bold answers.

That's not what I'd expected: standing ovations every evening. And in no less a place than the house of the Deutsche Oper am Rhein. The Düsseldorf audience loves its ballet company and the choreographies of its director, the Swiss Martin Schläpfer. But now we'd arrived with our company, Flamencos en route, and we'd created a piece together, "adónde vas, Siguriya?" Classical dancers were dancing with flamenco dancers to flamenco music. The audiences had never seen anything like it before, but they

The Swiss choreographer Brigitta Luisa Merki is a master of staging unique encounters. In the monastery church of Königsfelden in Windisch in the canton of Aargau, she has for several years brought together flamenco, choral singing, contemporary music and the visual arts to form "total works of art" under the brand "tanz&kunst königsfelden." This is all rooted in her work with her own dance company in Baden, Flamencos en route, which for more than 30 years has been offering a fresh perspective on the art of flamenco. With this company, Merki is continually striking out on her own – exploring contemporary dance, contemporary music, Arab music, and, more recently, ballet. In the autumn of 2015 she will be touring through Germany and Switzerland with her work "haiku flamenco."

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enjoyed it. That was an extraordinary experience for me. Our company was accepted into the regular program, all of us, along with our musicians. And our piece was presented on the same evening as works by such famous choreographers as Mats Ek and Martin Schläpfer. It was really inspiring to work in a theater with a classically trained company. Otherwise, I'm always on my own with my dance company Flamencos en route, whose personnel can vary from one production to the next.

I founded Flamencos en route in 1984. In the 2014/15 season we celebrated our 30th anniversary with four productions. "Siesta" was an installation in the Aarau riding arena. In "perlas peregrinas" I returned to some of my best earlier work. The production "haiku flamenco" is inspired by Japanese haikus. And then there was "adónde vas, Siguriya?" in Düsseldorf.

I attended my first flamenco course in Zurich. It was held by the internationally known Swiss flamenco dancer Susana Audeoud, who gave open classes at the Opera House. Her husband Antonio Robledo accompanied her classes on the piano. I already liked to dance when I was a child. And I had a mother who was artistically gifted: all six of us children were able to learn an instrument. I would have liked to become an actress. But my parents thought I should first train for a "proper job." And so I became a primary school teacher. At the same time, I kept in close touch with theater and dance. Nevertheless, it was a long, winding road that I took to become a professional dancer.

It was back then in the Zurich Opera House that I got hooked. Working with Susana, I had the feeling that flamenco was something very close to me. I was fascinated by its emotionality. So I went to Spain to train as a professional flamenco dancer – though I always stayed in touch with my first teacher.

When I later founded my company, Susana became its artistic director and her husband Antonio was in charge of the music. Flamencos en route was a brave step to take. We started with five women from five different countries. The aim was to create an international ensemble, because its message was that the nature of flamenco is something that gifted dancers can pass on, even if they're not from its land of origin. And gifted dancers will also find their own forms of flamenco. This is something we've pursued right down to the present day. With our musicians too. I've always had musicians with us who came from different styles and cultures – we've had people from as far away as Sweden and South America.

In flamenco, it's the human element that's at the core of it. Even when you take just the simplest of steps, you have to stand up and give something of yourself. You have to commit yourself. Perhaps that's what connected me to it. For a long time, we practiced dance theater – we danced "Don Juan," "Don Quijote" and "La Celestina." We played roles. But then I moved into a quite different direction. I had discovered the dance potential and the musicality of flamenco very early on, and now I wanted to explore all that further. I left Spanish topics behind me and created my own programs, letting myself be inspired by the German poetry of a Hilde Domin or by the work of the Aargau-based poet Andreas Neeser.

I put out feelers and opened up my flamenco to other styles of dance, of music and of art. Then I came back to flamenco itself again. And in this way I was able to cast off the pathos and the exaggerated passion that sometimes afflicts flamenco. It all depends on the people I encounter. I have to acknowledge what they're able to bring with them, and how they are able to express themselves. That is my big challenge as a choreographer. I always create my choreographies for the people who are to dance them. I actually created my Düsseldorf piece for and about the Brazilian ballet dancer Marlúcia do Amaral.

This is probably the key to the success of my productions at "tanz&kunst königsfelden." To combine dance, music and the visual arts, Spanish and Arab music, contemporary dance and flamenco – all this interests me as a form of communication, not as an exercise in "fusion." Düsseldorf was an extreme example, because it brought a highly stylized classical dancer, Marlúcia do Amaral, into contact with Ricardo Moro, who embodies the purest flamenco – he's a flamenco genius with lightning-quick feet. It was a risk, but one that was more than worth it. ♦



Opening up flamenco to the most varied styles of dance, music and art: Brigitta Luisa Merki.