

Der Bund

December 22, 2019

by **Marianne Mühlemann**

Where Demons Slumber

For 35 years, Flamencos en route have demonstrated that their music – though rich in tradition – is full of zeitgeist. “Ay!”, their anniversary production, is as hypnotic as a nocturnal dance tableau.

Beautiful Ghostly Shadows: “Ay!”

You would have to be extremely hard-nosed to not flinch at the sound of the scream: “Aaaayyy!” For it sets your teeth on edge immediately. Like a knife it penetrates you, its blade aiming for the most vulnerable spot – your very soul. For a brief moment, time seems to stop at the Dampfzentrale venue. An abyss opens up, giving the spectator the impression of staring straight into the darkest recesses of the soul, to the place where all the nameless demons of the subconscious slumber.

Federico García Lorca, the poet, musician and fighter for a better Spain, who was murdered in 1936, was well aware of all the nuances “Ay!” can express and eternalized them in passionate poems. Today, Swiss Choreographer Brigitta Luisa Merki also meticulously analyzes the various meanings of the mysterious “Ay!”. And more: she has dedicated her most recent production to this monosyllable pregnant with meaning and timbre. “Ay! – Viñetas de Lorca”, so the title of the round-dance-like sequence of metaphoric tableaux Merki conjures onto the stage in celebration of the 35th anniversary of Flamencos en route. In many ways, the production evokes the company’s own artistic path. The beginning and end of the performance are marked by fantastic guitar and percussion rhythms interspersed with iridescent piano and organ sounds, reminiscent of Antonio Robledo, Flamencos en route’s long-term composer, who passed away in 2014.

Susana’s (1916 – 2010) spirit lives on in the rigor and the passion of the dance, which suddenly transform into the unrestrained joy of bulerías and tangos. Very likely, Flamencos en route would not exist, were it not for the Bernese dancer who, together with Spanish dancer José de Udaeta, achieved international renown in the 1940s. Susana left the responsibility for her artistic legacy in the hands of her master-class student, Brigitta Luisa Merki, who took it to

extraordinary levels. For, Flamencos en route's three and a half decades of top-rated creative performances at home and abroad are unique among Swiss dance companies.

Well then, "Ay!". A sigh, a cry of pleasure and pain. Together with the six musicians, singers, and seven dancers as well as with Guest Choreographers David Coria and Eduardo Leal, Merki weaves the numerous images in "Ay!" into a harmonious total work of art. Once more, the choreographer uses her artistic intuition to create a successful amalgamation of tradition and modern zeitgeist, leaving the audience even more immediately touched than Lorca's poetry does.

Merki makes the invisible visible and gives the unspeakable a form of expression. Parallel to the multi-layered soundtrack of song and live music, Merki's choreography transforms emotions into bodily movements, space, and time, thus handing the dancers a concise means of expression. Inornate, technically perfect, and intense. Unfurling like a nocturnal chiaroscuro painting, the hypnotic concert dance keeps imploding in virtuosic solo (Eloy Aguilar) and ensemble dances. Sculptures shaped like humans create ghostly shadows on an otherwise empty stage. They resemble cypress trees in the evening glow – or couples in an abstract drawing, drunk on love, throwing their arms into the air.

Gillian White, a Swiss-British sculptor, created the movable stage objects. Their emblematic shape matches the choreography and the space perfectly. Black, sandy beige, white and pastel colors dominate the controlled color scheme. The stage setting hints at the southern heat and the barrenness of the Andalusian landscape. The costumes made from luxurious fabrics by Carmen Perez Mateos serve as versatile props. When the women slap the floor with their cloaks as if they were wet pieces of laundry, the synchronous rhythm becomes a common noise. The three large, black, fringed scarves gyrating wildly through the semi-darkness like eagle wings (choreographed by Eduardo Leal) are as magic as the sonorous vibrations in Karima Nayt's voice.

In a technically challenging solo, Carmen Iglesias picks up the archaic darkness of the production, only to break with it suddenly and humorously when her gigantic train "eats" her up until there is nothing left but her naked feet. An evening full of beauty, precision and surprises.

Additional performances at Dampfzentrale in Bern: Sunday, December 22nd and December 27th – 29th.

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