

A Brooklyn boy's flamenco to fame

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BY DEE GIBNEY

He was only a boy from Brooklyn growing up in the Mediterranean quarter of this raucous city in the thirties.

To keep her son off the streets and steer him clear of the violence that was a way of life in those rough, tough years of the Great Depression, Jose Greco's mother enrolled him in painting classes after school. And after painting, there were dancing classes.

And if the teen-age Jose didn't attend classes there would be an accounting – no movies nor friends allowed to come to the house. The accounting wasn't necessary. Far being an onerous task, the classes, especially the dancing, were fun.

Plucked from his rural Italian environment at the age of six when his Italian/Spanish parents emigrated to the U.S., the young Jose found the tumult of New York frightening and overpowering.

There was the language barrier and the shock but also the excitement of new things. But it was the frustration at not being able to express himself that was the most difficult. Dance made him feel at one with his environment.

“It took years to feel that I belonged and for the longest time dance was the only world I knew. It was the only way I could express myself.”

But even before the formal lessons, the love of song, music and dance was part of his childhood culture.

“Until I was ten, I assumed that the Greek, French, Portuguese, Spanish and Italian immigrants who made up the Mediterranean quarter of Brooklyn were all the same,” he says, “like Italy with different dialects. Each group had its picnics and festivities with traditional costumes. For me it was all one colorful blend.

“Dancing was something that came naturally, that was taken for granted. Before you are even aware that something is developing, you start doing your part at every party and suddenly you're more and more in demand. Soon the feeling is in your blood and you start thinking that maybe this is something you would like to pursue.”

The lessons in which his mother had wisely enrolled him sealed his fate.

“Seeing and meeting Vicente Escudero, the top male Spanish dancer in the world perform was electrifying,” he recalls. “He became my inspiration.”

By the age of 15 Jose was already performing in operas – *Carmen*, *Traviata* – that had gypsy or Latin influenced roles.

“I went on to do more unconventional things like nightclub engagements. Then I had my first big opportunity. I auditioned to dance with the immortal Argentinita, the greatest of the great. I was only 17 and to my surprise, not only was I accepted by the troupe, I got to be her partner.”

When World War II erupted, Jose was still too young to be enlisted. He continued to partner with Argentinita until her untimely death at the end of the war. Her younger sister, the renowned Pilar Lopez took her place. Together, she and the still teen-aged Jose toured Europe.

He moved to Spain and stayed, forming his own company in 1949. By 1951 he was a huge star in the world of flamenco and began to tour. Nana Lorca, the top female Spanish dancer joined the company in 1963, forming her own troupe two years later. Five years later the two companies merged and just over a year ago so did the two virtuosos. They married in 1973.

If flamenco has a distinctive style today, it is that of Jose Greco.

“Spanish dance is basically folkloric,” he says. “If you take regional dances and put them on stage they simply do not belong. They belong in their natural environment -- in pastoral settings, in taverns, at festivities. You cannot preserve the folklore in its pure form for the stage.

“So to bring them to the stage you have to create a kind of theatre around them, to stylize them – while still preserving their national identity. The stylization is in the elegance with which you present the dance.

“The choreographer in Spain is relatively unimportant. A young student is inspired only by other dancers. It is the dancer who is the stylist. And if he or she has flair, they will have contributed something to the art.”

There was a time when everyone became imitating the Jose Greco style, looking like caricatures in the process he says. But two other talented dancers emerged, adding another dimension to the style, and as Jose Greco likes to tell it, restoring the authority and respectability to Spanish dance which had begun to degenerate into a kind of vulgarity.

“It’s a masculine virile form of dance. It is hauntingly sexual but not in an obvious way. It inspires relationships between movements that create the fire and passion. The movements are quick and sharp, yet panther-like; they are stalking movements.

“The female movements are sensuous, often violent with sudden suspense in a quick sharp hold.”

“I have never sacrificed anything for the sake of the dance unless it was for the theatre,” he says. My goal has always been the moment of truth and of accomplishment.”

A little apprehensive about his performance in Hong Kong this week following a bad fall over a luggage trolley at the airport, Mr. Greco worried aloud about his ability to negotiate some of the more tricky routines.

“If you lose assurance, the dance won’t have the same impact. I want everything to be perfect.

“But,” he adds with a flash of Spanish pride, “I am not worried. If I can walk I can dance.”