The stamp of greatness

Spain's high-priestess of flamenco, Eva La Yerbabuena, is bringing her mesmerising show to London. Ismene Brown met her in Madrid

By Ismene Brown

06 July 2002 • 12:01am

It is 2am in a dark-brown, cave-like restaurant in Madrid, and we've been talking about flamenco for five hours, but there's no indication yet that my five Spanish companions are running out of things to say. Hearty quantities of rioja and tortilla have warmed our hearts and filled our bellies, and the waiters are running for brandy. A stream of delighted people have swung by our table to address the little, quiet, serious young woman on my left, who is feted in Spain as a flamenco dancer without rival today.

They all have some difficulty in accepting that this is the same Eva La Yerbabuena who they have seen on stage. The maitre d' of the Casa Lucio went wild with delight and shock as we entered. "She's so small! She's half the size she appears on stage!" he babbles. Even Spain's deputy minister of culture turns up at the table to congratulate her at length, while expressing his surprise at the modest appearance of such a star.

La Yerbabuena looks nothing like a diva. Aged 31, just 4ft 11in tall, she totters on high straw platforms in her white cheesecloth tunic and cut-off denims, and you would take

her for a student.

Flamenco is a dark, bloody thing of privacy and loneliness, a dialogue between musician and dancer that reaches far beyond the shorthand supplied by so many dancers, the clatter of heels, the swirl of frills, the strum of guitars. There is nothing more satisfyingly miserable than great flamenco. It gives every impression of having welled up from the weeping depths of the earth since time began, hoarse wails of "ay-ay-ay!" prefacing its songs, which are brooding cries of anguish or fatalistic dreams, with love and death the main themes.

"When I come to die, I ask of you a favour,/ That with the braids of your black hair/ They tie my hands," goes one wrenching lament, presumably uttered by a gipsy man facing the firing squad. Every song is piercingly short, jabbing like a stiletto into the heart. Those gipsies may not have known how to write, but they knew how to turn a song.

Where they came from is another mystery. Flamenco's roots are reputedly embedded in so many sources - 16th-century Flemish soldiers, Romanian gipsies, Indian kathak dancers, Moorish troubadours, Andalusian social politics - that it seems rather baffling when people talk about "authentic" flamenco and chew their nails about its being modernised. Joaquin Cortes - whose name crops up in every flamenco conversation, usually pejoratively - is a moderniser whom the older generations hate for his shallow flash. Eva La Yerbabuena, by contrast, is a moderniser who is hailed as a worthy heir of the great tradition.

When you see her dance her show Eva at Sadler's Wells next week, you will understand why this is so. Although she breaks custom and practice by wrapping a narrative

framework around her performance, she dances like a doyenne of the highest flamenco tradition, slinky, fascinating, but wrapped in a sombre, perfectionist sort of mystery. Three years running she has been voted Spain's greatest young flamenco dancer. Abroad, too, she is famous, captivating the film-maker Mike Figgis, who featured her in his films Flamenco Women and last year's Hotel.

She danced alongside Mikhail Baryshnikov for Pina Bausch to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Bausch's modern dance company; she danced at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in its 21st-Century Stars gala last year. Last January the US dance critics were raving about her in New York.

Earlier this summer she and her musicians, headed by her amiable husband, guitarist

Paco Jarano, have been touring Cuba, a country that she frequently visits to learn their rhythmic secrets. They performed in a tobacco factory, the audience rolling cigars as they watched. "A unique experience," says Paco ecstatically, puffing on a large cigar.

He is a short, friendly man of 35, who learned guitar from his father, another professional flamenco guitarist. He is from Seville and she is from Granada - they assure me that these towns have enormously different characters, and Madrid is like another country altogether. In the southern cities, Seville, Granada, Cordoba and Jerez, he says, children now take flamenco where the youth of Madrid take ballet. Interest in flamenco, it seems, blossoms and fades quite regularly - currently on the up after a long lull.

He and Eva have a daughter of seven, and when I show Eva the first programme I have of her, on a Juan Martin tour in 1995, she exclaims in horror at her post-childbirth size.

Surely flamenco dancers don't worry about their weight, I venture. "I worry for me," she says firmly.

The adoring waiters are becoming manic - one grabs a customer on her way to the loo and tells her about "the super-famous dancer". The customer, a glitzy blonde with rioja-glazed eyes, asks if the man who sells tickets is there. Shrugging his shoulders at such dumbness, the waiter empties a bottle of Amaretto into six tumblers, on the house. "You are a person of such humility," he crows, beaming at Eva.

Shy Eva smiles slightly and shrinks into her chair. I ask her how she gets used to such adulation. "I don't, really." And when people come up to her and praise her dancing? "It's gratifying," she says, briefly. Is she the sort of dancer who prefers the privacy of studio rehearsal to the hurly-burly of the public performance? There are quite a few dancers like that. "Oh," her face changes totally, and she bursts animatedly into explanation, full of "comunicacion" and "pasion".

Sometimes, she tells me, "el gente" (the public) are so attentive as she gathers herself to dance that she can "smell it", and she enjoys herself hugely. Other audiences feel tense and "I find it hard to take a breath, just to relieve the tension and take my first step." The stage on such occasions feels like lead, she says, like something to be fought. "When I'm feeling tired or tense, I think of something Juan Belmonte said, that if you want to be a bullfighter you have to forget you have a body. I think about that a lot."

Juan Belmonte was a nonpareil among bullfighters, immortalised by Ernest Hemingway in Death in the Afternoon. He was, like La Yerbabuena, short, in a

profession where to be tall meant elegance came more easily but, like La Yerbabuena, he achieved elegance through breaking the usual rules.

"Once [Belmonte] had done it," wrote Hemingway, "all bullfighters had to do it, or attempt to do it, since there is no going back in the matter of sensations."

- 'Eva' is at Sadler's Wells on July 9-13 (020 7863 8000).

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