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# Contemporary Flamenco 101

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## A Visit with Niurca Márquez

Niurca Márquez is a contemporary Flamenco dancer who is part of an ongoing evolution of this world dance form. She holds a BA in Dance, an MA in Cultural Studies and has trained professionally both in the US and Spain. She is in town for the Feldenkrais Center of Houston's training program, and will perform this weekend as part of her visit. She brings A + C editor, Nancy Wozny, into the contemporary Flamenco mix.

### **A + C: It's unusual to have training in both contemporary and world forms. What brought you to Flamenco?**

Niurca Márquez: I owe that combination to a series of twists and turns in my training, and in particular to having been trained in the US, where we do not see this as a conflict, and boy am I thankful for that. But as per your question on what brought me to Flamenco, it's the second time this week I've been asked to consider that question and quite honestly, my sense is that it was always there. I'm the daughter of Cuban immigrants, and my grandmother was the one who first enrolled me in ballet classes. It was also she who continually made reference to our Spanish ancestry, made sure I saw all of Sarita Montiel's movies and sat and watched Carlos Saura's "El Amor Brujo" with me. It was Spanish actress Trini Moren, wife of El Niño de Utrera, who first noticed the fact that ballet was not the best choice for me and insisted that her daughter bring a Spanish Dance teacher to the studio to work with me. I have her to thank as well.

I have to say that, after living in Spain and getting to know the inner workings of Flamenco, I suspect that my father's love of music, particularly Spanish rock from the 1960's, probably also had something to do with it. I was well into my dance studies in college when I decided to focus on Flamenco. I continued to experiment with other forms, such as Afro-Cuban, Argentine Tango and contemporary dance, performing in these styles on a number of occasions. In the end, Flamenco felt closest to home, it was a language I understood and resonated with on a very deep cultural level.

### **A + C: We have an idea of what Flamenco is, however, a term like "experimental Flamenco" is new to many of us. Can you explain what it looks like?**

Niurca Márquez: That's a trick question. I say this because experiments can often yield many different results. My work is very much in line with contemporary Flamenco, a line that has developed considerably in the last 10 years or so, primarily at the hands of artists who were looking to create content-based work that stepped outside the boundaries of traditional "theatrics."

It's work that seeks to delve deeper into the hidden or underlining elements in Flamenco and bring them to the forefront in an attempt to strip away all the unnecessary packaging and present work that is relevant to our own individual here and now. Because of this, the music, costuming, set, lighting and movement can be drastically different from one piece to the next.

### **A + C: Can you give us an example?**

Niurca Márquez: Sure, in one work I will begin barefoot and either work my way to my shoes or not use them at all. In some works I use very traditional music and deconstruct the movement vocabulary to create a different correlation of events. In other works I have played with the make-up or traditional elements of flamenco like the fan or the "bata de cola" (train dress) in very non-traditional ways.

And finally in some, although I use traditional music and costuming, I have dismantled the traditional dance structures to further explore the lyricism of the music or to tell my story.

### **A + C: Is it still Flamenco though?**

Niurca Márquez: The unifying element is that they all begin with the very essence of Flamenco, what I like to call the “flamenco state.” They are characterized by an attention to narrative, a need to communicate an experience (much like you would see happening between artists in a traditional flamenco work), physically the presence of tension and distension or oppositional relationships in the body, a close relationship with rhythm and the sound environment and the appearance in some way of text, whether in the singing or in another form.

These to me are the primary elements of Contemporary or Experimental Flamenco. The experiment usually entails playing with how many of these are present at any given time and how they interact. The clearest examples are the variety of works presented each year at the “Flamenc Empiric” Festival curated by Juan Carlos Lerida in Barcelona.

### **A+C: Tell us a bit about your teachers Belen Maya and Juan Carlos Lerida?**

Niurca Márquez: They have been two very important people in my life over the past seven years. It feels strange to call them teachers as I have not had a traditional student-teacher relationship with them. There have been others who fill that space, but they have been friends and mentors in so many ways. They, along with Yolanda Heredia, have been instrumental in this search for a personal voice in my dancing and choreography. When I arrived in Spain to live there permanently in 2007, I thought I'd have to quit dancing for many reasons, and it was Belen who basically coerced me back into the studio to “play.” She later choreographed a solo work for me and continued to advise me as I created works of my own. Juan Carlos gave me a space to voice my work at the first “Flamenc Empiric” in 2009. It was quite a risk he took with a few of us. His insistence that there were other voices that needed to be heard and that this Contemporary Flamenco was a place that looked very different depending on the guide was gutsy, given that this was the first major festival of its kind. He was also the one who first introduced me to Katsugen and dusted off many long-forgotten tools for creating work that until then I'd relegated to the archives of my college years.



The last one to give me a final push was Yolanda Heredia, who I first took classes from in 1998, and then re-encountered when I participated in Flamenc Empiric. Heredia is a recognized flamenco master from a long line of gypsies in Sevilla who gifted me her technique for the “bata de cola” and actually trusts me to teach it outside of Spain.

Heredia has been quite inspirational in the development of my own teaching methodology and ideas about how to delve even deeper into the roots of Flamenco in order to really understand it. Not the designer flamenco we're used to these days or the flamenco in a “dark smoke-filled tavern,” but rather the flamenco that is passed down from one generation to the next, in the kitchen listening to your mother sing, in the way people speak to each other on the street, in the way we inhabit and share space.

She was there when I presented my first really experimental piece in 2009, and I was terrified as I knew her to be extremely traditional and one of a very small number of masters of the bata de cola (the piece basically deconstructed the bata). What she said afterwards, which I will not repeat here as it was very graphic, was the best compliment I could have ever received. She took me on as a student after that, so I guess she appreciated my attempt.

**A+C: I'm curious how the Feldenkrais Method informs your dancing practice?**

Niurca Márquez: In 2002, I was at a concert when I began to feel extreme pain and discomfort like I had not experienced ever. Weeks of bed-rest and an MRI later showed a considerable injury to my neck and I was told I could not dance anymore. At the time, I was a soloist in one company and was a collaborating artist in another, so this was out of the question. The director of one of the companies put me in contact with Dale Russel, a Feldenkrais practitioner, who over the years has become a close friend, and the rest reads like most of these stories.

At first, I used the method to find ways to move around the injury until it was better. Then it progressed to using it as a warm-up of sorts, to keep me safe and healthy as I continued to dance. Eventually though, I realized that it had seeped into much of what I did, including my understanding of movement and how to create works. I started the training program in Barcelona in 2008, but had to leave it for personal reasons.

I continued my own practice in the studio, but in 2010 that changed drastically. I had the opportunity to work with choreographer Georg Blaschke and Sascha Krausneker, who are part of the Vienna Training program, and something clicked for me. They have been using the method to create work and suddenly in their lab everything made sense. I had finally found my in to teach and choreograph Flamenco in a way that made sense, from the inside out so to speak instead of from a final goal, look, speed or image.

It also solidified what I had already been noticing in my teaching over the years as a way to enter movement that was natural for my students and construct or mold the Flamenco from there, instead of from some idea of what it was, that was distorted to begin with.

So in essence what had been part of my personal practice for some years began to be an active part of both my teaching and composition



**A+C: Do you ever use Awareness Through Movement (ATM), the group movement part of the method, to create dances?**

Niurca Márquez: Yes, I worked with another dancer in Seville to create a work based on ATM's. Essentially, we would start with an ATM and then look at the "residue", or what was left in our bodies afterward, and would improvised based on that, so the movement signatures were born out of the ATM's. It's the same process I'm using in my new work "The History House." Because of the work's theme it seems like a good approach...we'll see what happens.

**A+C: Tell us about the show coming up on May that you are doing with your husband, the contemporary flamenco guitarist and composer Jose Luis Rodriguez?**

Niurca Márquez: "Mi Sentir" is exactly that, our way of feeling. It's a compilation of sorts of some of our earlier collaborations, sprinkled with some new material. It will feature all original compositions by Jose Luis and two to three "interventions" in dance.

When we first started to work together, much of what we did revolved around the idea of making the dance a visual representation of the music. We were both frustrated by the fact that so much of conventional flamenco is ruled by the dancing, and as such much of the beauty and intricacy of the music has been lost. So no, there will not be any lengthy footwork sections or "look at me" moments in the dancing...it will be much more about look at this, feel this, experience this. One of the dances is from our work "Intimate Spaces" that is currently on tour, and another is part of an upcoming project of Jose Luis' "Resonancias" that we hope to debut sometime in the Spring of 2013.

This show tends to shift and morph depending on where we are and how we're relating to our environment. In this case, we wanted to pay tribute to some of the palos or rhythms that we each love and share that with our audience, give them an opportunity to experience them rather than simply listening.

The evening won't include the more experimental work, we hope to get a chance to show some of that in September when we return, but even when it seems "traditional," I think folks will see and more importantly feel that there is something different happening. We hope that they will start to understand how we experience our own "Nu Flamenco."

**-Nancy Wozny**

**Niurca Márquez and Jose Luis Rodriguez perform at Casa de Lucia on May 19 at 8pm & May 20 at 5:30 pm, at 7016 Culmore Drive. Call 832 721-0357. Suggested donation \$25.**