

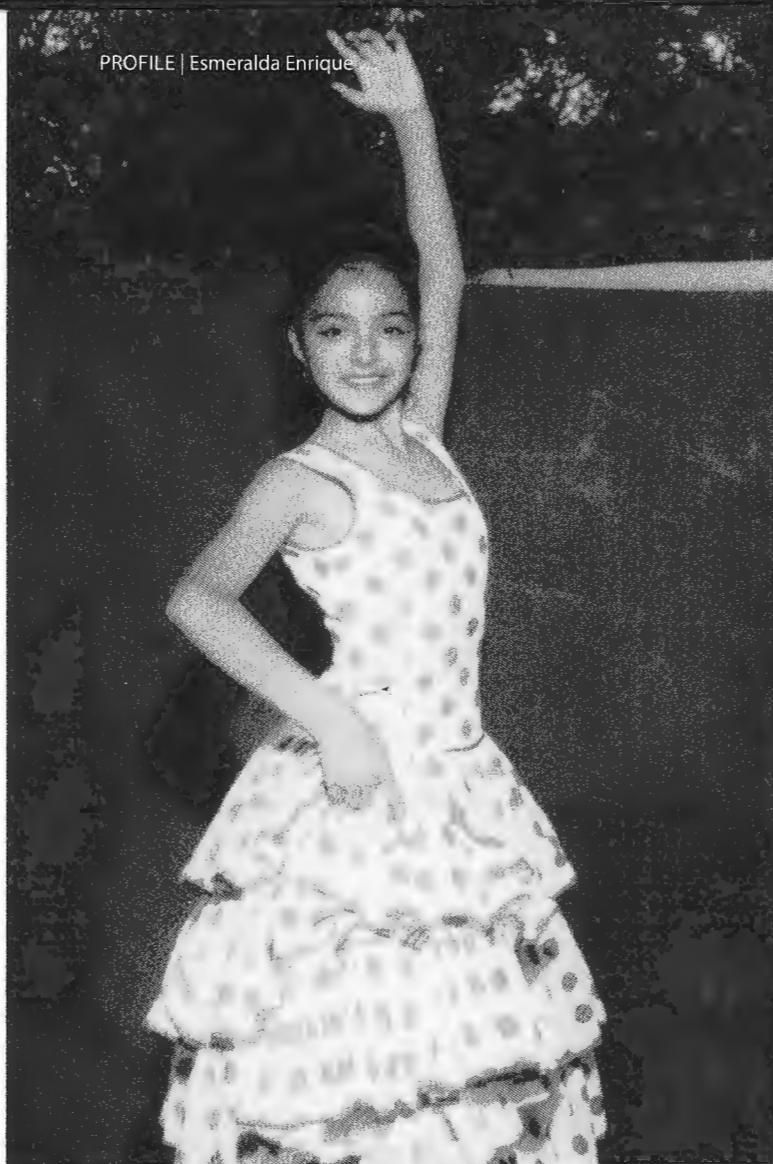
PROFILE

Outward Expressions of the Inner Soul

Esmeralda Enrique's Life in Flamenco

By PAULA CITRON





Esmeralda Enrique, family backyard in Texas, age 12; Esmeralda Enrique performing at the Don Quijote, Toronto, 1982 / Photos courtesy of Dance Collection Danse

HERE ARE THREE FACTS that you may not know about Esmeralda Enrique. She is a fourth-generation Texan. She is named after the gypsy in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, a novel her mother was reading when she was pregnant with Enrique. She performed with the José Greco Dance Company when it was the opening act for Frank Sinatra in Las Vegas.

Facts more universally known about Enrique are that she is one of Canada's most distinguished flamenco artists, and that both her Esmeralda Enrique Spanish Dance Company and her school, The Academy of Spanish Dance, are celebrating their thirtieth anniversaries this season. Over the years, Enrique has received three Dora Mavor Moore Award nominations for outstanding new choreography and four for outstanding performance. And in 2008, Enrique was voted one of the 10 Most Influential Hispanic Canadians by the Canadian Hispanic Business Association.

Enrique was born in San Antonio in the shadow of the Alamo, the site of a legendary 1836 battle during the Texas War of Independence against Mexico. She is the fourth eldest of eight girls and three boys. On her mother's side, her ancestry goes back to the 200 settlers whom Spain enticed from the Canary Islands in 1700 to populate the empty lands of Texas. Her father, an airplane mechanic, was of Mexican descent.

Her mother, Herminia Acosta Enrique, was a remarkable woman. "She won a scholarship to art school," explains Enrique, "but my grandfather wouldn't let her go. Her artistic creativity came out in her dress designing and story telling. She was also an historian. From her I got my inspiration to always be curious, and to find beauty in everything." The family was poor and their fun had to be homemade. "We couldn't do anything that cost money, so we performed Mexican folk dances and plays in the backyard. My mother put a blanket on a clothesline to create a curtain and a make-shift stage." The Enriques became known as the "theatrical family" of San Antonio. Every weekend, there was *Fiesta Night* on the river. The outdoor stage was called the River Walk Theatre, and it was there that the Enrique sisters, Carla (older by two years) and Esmeralda, age fourteen, cut their teeth as professional performers. It is also where they discovered flamenco dance.

Carla and Esmeralda first took lessons in Spanish classical dance and flamenco from Yolanda Almanguer, an artist who appeared regularly in *Fiesta Night*. But their main teachers were Teresa and Curo Champion who ran a local tablao (tavern) that featured flamenco dance on a wooden stage. With a repertoire that included Mexican folk dance, Spanish classical dance, and

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flamenco, the Enrique sisters were invited to perform all over Texas and the Mexican border towns. "I never thought of dance as a career," says Enrique. "It was just something that I did."

When Enrique was still in high school, the family moved to San Diego when her father got a job at another air force base. But even before then, the sisters had hit the big leagues. While Enrique was still in San Antonio, the director of *Piesta Night* recommended the sisters to Luisa Triana, a famous *flamenca* based in Los Angeles. Always supportive, their father, Julio Martinez Enrique, found them a studio apartment in Los Angeles for the summer months so they could perform with Triana. On his days off, Julio would drive up from San Diego to keep an eye on his teenage daughters. One of their biggest gigs of this period was with José Greco in Las Vegas. Enrique still remembers the excitement of seeing all the celebrities who came backstage to visit with Frank Sinatra who was the show's headliner.

Enrique enrolled in a college Spanish literature course in San Diego when she graduated from high school, but it was not to be. Carla, who was still on tour with José Greco, wrote a letter saying that she was going to study flamenco in Spain, and Enrique should join her. Enrique dropped out of college, took a Greyhound bus to meet up with the Greco company, and the sisters travelled to Spain. They had \$100 between them.

When asked what initially attracted her to flamenco, Enrique's answer is immediate and direct. "In Mexican folk dance," she says, "you are a character. Flamenco, on the other hand, draws out the individual. You grow as an artist because you are constantly learning about yourself. It makes dance a more enjoyable experience. Flamenco is the outward expression of the inner soul. It is the connection of human to human."

It had long been a dream of the sisters to study "real" flamenco in Spain. Their teachers, the Champions, had learned flamenco in Mexico. Their only other contact with the authentic dance style was mimicking poses in magazines. Madrid, when they arrived, was a reality check. They soon realized that their money was going to be eaten up by the classes they were taking every day. It was clear that they needed jobs in order to continue to study. Being hired for those jobs, however, was easier said than done. Enrique describes the peculiar hierarchy that exists among flamenco artists in Spain in terms of their desirability for performance jobs. In short, the Spanish *flamencos* are snobs. In the pecking order, the gypsies, the Roma people who brought flamenco to Spain, are the highest tier, then the Andalusians, then Spanish citizens in general, dancers from Spanish-speaking countries, and on to the lowest rank: the foreigners (such as Americans). Carla was lucky, and was invited to work in a

famous *tablaos*. At eighteen, Enrique was adrift until she met a gypsy *flamenca* called Maravilla from Seville. "We got to know each other at the dance studios," remembers Enrique, "and she turned out to be very generous and open." Through her own agent, Maravilla arranged an audition for Enrique, who literally spent all the rest of her study money to buy a used costume for this important occasion. "I was told to keep my mouth shut so they wouldn't know I was a foreigner," she says.

The *tablaos* was Los Canasteros (The Basketmakers), a legendary Madrid club that is still going strong; at the time, it was run by the famous *cantaor* (flamenco singer) Manolo Caracol. Enrique was one of fourteen dancers. While the troupe performed choreographed solos, duets and group dances, the heart of the entertainment was the improvised *cuadro* or group finale. Explains Enrique: "We would sit in a half circle. The leader would indicate to a dancer to get up and improvise. The rest of us would *toca las palmas* (keep time with rhythmic hand clapping), and by the end of the week, my palms would be bleeding. This went on seven nights a week, two shows a night. There is no better flamenco school than the *cuadro* because there are no rehearsals. You're pushed into being inventive, and the crowd becomes very negative if you are not."

Enrique kept signing new performance contracts to finance her dance studies. As well as flamenco, she also trained in the more theatrical regional dances of Spain, such as the *jota*, *fandango* and *bolero*, and the classical dances of the Spanish court, which were influenced by the French ballet tradition. Her favourite teacher was the legendary Victoria Eugenia (Betty) who would go on to become the director of the Ballet Nacional de España (1993-1997). When the Madrid clubs shut down for August, Enrique toured the resort towns. Weeks became months, which became years. "My one big sadness," says Enrique, "is that I didn't see my younger siblings grow up."

It was a lonely life, even more so when Carla married a guitarist and moved to Mexico. Although Enrique had spoken Spanish all her life, the *madrileños* (natives of Madrid) never accepted her as one of their own, and it was a frustrating experience not to fit in. She also missed the vibrant atmosphere of her large family. After five years in Madrid, Enrique returned to San Diego. Once home, however, she realized that she belonged in Spain after all. Her evolution as a dancer was more important than the loneliness.

During the next eight years Enrique toured the world with a multitude of dance companies, and performed at many of the top *tablaos*, her talent ensuring that she was never out of work. Her driving force was always the pursuit of becoming a better dancer. As she says now: "I learned what I had to do to get along, to let the insults go over my head, to live within the system and concentrate on being an artist."

How Enrique came to Toronto in 1981 is one of those twists of fate that change the directions of our lives. She had been offered both a contract in Japan and one at El Flamenco, a new *tablaos* in Toronto on Bloor Street West. The owner was Sam Molinaro, the boyfriend of her friend Yolanda Román whom she had met in Madrid. Because Yolanda was more insistent, Enrique opted for Toronto and signed a six-month contract. She never went back to Spain. It's a choice she has never regretted though Enrique does remember crying at the experience of her first Toronto winter.

“Esmeralda has her finger on the pulse of Spanish flamenco, both past and present” – Lionel Félix, founder of the Toronto International Flamenco Festival

Says Enrique: “On opening night at El Flamenco, I was peeking out of the curtain and saw an interesting man sitting there in a white shirt. No one knew who he was. After the show, the man invited me to his table. My escape route was that if he turned out to be a dud, I was to signal my friend’s father to come for me.” The man was Sal Principato, an Italian immigrant who worked in the complaints department of a union. He kept coming to every performance and the couple were married three months later. They have no children. The Principatos, like Enrique’s company and school, are celebrating their thirtieth anniversary. The very supportive Principato is on Enrique’s board of directors.

When El Flamenco closed, Enrique performed at Don Quijote on College Street, but flamenco dance opportunities were limited in Toronto. The question became – what was Enrique to do in the long term? The answer was to find a studio and open up a school. This, in turn, led to the founding of her company in 1982. Becoming a choreographer came with the territory. While Enrique does not travel to Spain that often, she does keep *au courant* by bringing Spanish flamenco artists to Toronto for workshops and master classes twice a year, and by watching the latest DVDs. She also hosts a biennial conference, *The Art of Flamenco*, which brings together flamenco artists from across Canada to share experiences, discuss the challenges of flamenco and create a flamenco network.

Enrique inspires loyalty. Her present musical director, guitarist Nicolás Hernández, has worked with her for fifteen years. Among the dancers that she has trained, Nancy Cardwell (performing as Paloma Cortés) has been in the company for sixteen years while for Angela Déiseach (Angela Del Sol) and Ilse Gudino (whose real name is Ilse Gudino) it has been fifteen. The male dancers are usually guests from Spain. The great Juan Ogalla from Madrid is a favourite. Ogalla even garnered a 2011 Dora Mavor Moore Award for outstanding dance performance in Enrique’s production of *Espejo de Oro/Mirror of Gold*.

But it has been much more difficult to find a regular *cantaor*. Because Enrique believes that flamenco dance cannot exist without the songs, a *cantaor* is of paramount importance. “Flamenco dance reveals the truth behind the words,” she says. “It is an interior monologue. Without the lyrics and their emotional essence, flamenco dance is just technique.” At first Enrique brought singers from Spain and later, Montréal, until she found local talent in Tamar Ilana and Shirley Pincay.

For all of this, “music does not come first,” states Enrique. “The emotional quality is the most important thing. The question ‘why’ is always in the studio.” Deciding on the configurations – solos or group dances – and the appropriate rhythms for each, dictate the musical choices. The two most important catchwords for Enrique are sincerity and integrity. “My job is to keep the dancers and musicians challenged,” she says.

The structural core of flamenco is based on specific rhythms or *compás*. The flamenco dances known as *bulería*, *soleá* and *alegría* all have twelve-beat units, albeit with different accents. There are also four-beat *compás* such as *farruca*, and three beats, such as *malagueña*. “To the uninitiated,” explains Enrique, “all flamenco dances look and sound the same. But because the audience doesn’t understand the nuances and subtleties of the rhythm of the dance, or how the dance is counter balanced against the rhythm of the songs, we have to make sure that there is an emotional connection to what they hear and see. Our dancing has to convey truth. You don’t need the academic definition of *alegría* to appreciate the skill and expressiveness of the dancer.”

Enrique’s dancers talk about their teacher as an inspirational force; studying with Enrique is more than taking a dance class. Explains Cardwell: “Training with Esmeralda is learning both technique and cultural theory. She believes that flamenco can shape your life, that it can empower you. She emphasizes the fact that we need to understand the historical roots of flamenco, and that as flamenco dancers, we are keepers of a trust. In fact, Esmeralda’s belief in flamenco as a life study has been very influential in terms of inspiring graduate work. Ilse Gudino and I both earned an MA, and Catalina Fellay is working on her PhD. My MA thesis was on the social and political history of flamenco.”

Déiseach points to Enrique’s generosity of spirit. “She is very giving, both as a performer and a teacher. There is a real sense that the company is a family. She believes that everyone can do flamenco and she makes you believe in yourself. She also gives opportunities for every dancer to shine. For her, flamenco is a vibrant, living art form. In terms of context, she has placed flamenco in the here and now of dance in Canada. She is very altruistic – it’s never about Esmeralda Enrique and her company; it’s always about the greater idea of flamenco.”

In fact, Enrique sees her role as a teacher as passing on the torch to others. “For me, teaching must contain three components – dance, music and cultural history. I provide



Esmeralda Enrique / Photos courtesy of Esmeralda Enrique Spanish Dance Company

information that you can't find in books. For example, I'm able to point out what event or time period inspired the lyrics of a song. I bring a broad base of knowledge to flamenco, because flamenco can never be separated from its heritage."

More to the point, her teaching reinforces the totality of flamenco. "I teach people to dance with all their senses. I work with very sensual images. What, for example, would flamenco be like if you could taste it, smell it or touch it? To be a complete performer, you have to incorporate every aspect of your entire body." Enrique has a theory as to why flamenco is having an upsurge in popularity at the moment, particularly the huge interest in taking classes and attending shows. "I think that in hard economic times," she points out, "people turn to things that make them happy. They're looking for things that are more fulfilling."

In spite of her deep knowledge of its roots, Enrique is not chained to the traditions of flamenco. She respects the history but she is also an experimenter. Among her fusion collaborators are kathak dancer Joanna De Souza, Middle East dancer Roula Said, and contemporary dancer Andrea Nann, not to mention jazz musician David "Fathead" Newman, the Hannaford Street Silver Band and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. As well as performing its own productions, the company is kept busy by appearing in festivals and at corporate functions.

Lionel Félix, the founder of the Toronto International Flamenco Festival, is a former Enrique student. Says Félix: "It's not so much that Esmeralda was a pioneer per se. Rather, she opened doors. She gave flamenco exposure. In her thirty years of shows, she introduced many people to flamenco, and as a result, she helped to develop a more informed audience. One of her greatest contributions is the master classes she organizes. Some of the guests have been legends that I had read about, like Manolete and La Tati, which was an absolute thrill. On the other hand, she also includes current stars like Isabel Bayon and

Belen Maya who appear at the top dance festivals in the world. In other words, Esmeralda has her finger on the pulse of Spanish flamenco, both past and present."

From company member Cardwell's point of view, Enrique has also helped make flamenco a respected part of dance in Canada. "If flamenco is recognized by the arts councils," she says, "it's because Esmeralda helped carve out that space." ~

Sommaire Voici trois faits peu connus sur Esmeralda Enrique. Elle est texane de quatrième génération. Elle est nommée en l'honneur de la gitane dans le *Bossu de Notre-Dame*, le roman que lisait sa mère enceinte. L'artiste a dansé avec la José Greco Dance Company lorsque celle-ci se présentait en première partie du spectacle de Frank Sinatra à Las Vegas. Faits notoires, cependant : Enrique est une des artistes flamencos les plus distinguées au Canada, et elle célèbre les trente ans de sa compagnie et de son école, la Esmeralda Enrique Spanish Dance Company et la Academy of Spanish Dance. Enrique découvre le flamenco à quatorze ans, lorsqu'elle danse des danses mexicaines à des fiestas communautaires avec sa sœur Carla à San Antonio, Texas. Quand je lui demande ce qui l'a attirée à la forme, la danseuse répond vivement. « En danse folklorique mexicaine », explique-t-elle, « on est un personnage. À l'inverse, le flamenco va chercher la personne même. On grandit comme artiste parce qu'on apprend continuellement sur soi. La danse devient ainsi une expérience plus agréable. Le flamenco est l'expression manifeste de l'âme. Il est le lien entre un humain et un autre. » Après trente ans, Enrique demeure une des artistes de flamenco bien aimée au Canada. ~

Esmeralda Enrique Spanish Dance Company presents
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