

~ The Musical

## POINT OF VIEW

Guitarist Victor Kolstee and dancer Rosario Ancer are well-known throughout the city for their spirited flamenco performances. Here, Victor introduces us to the art of flamenco through his own musical engagement with it. Rosario's story follows in *The Personals*. (October 1995)

## Victor Kolstee

### Vancouver Flamenco

I first heard the flamenco guitar on a Carlos Montoya recording and it knocked me over. It was Vancouver, 1960, and up to then, I had been learning to play a bit of folk music à la Peter, Paul and Mary, and the Kingston Trio, and going to the famous Sunday night hootenannies at the Inquisition on Seymour Street. I remember the songs that always made the greatest impression on me were invariably the ones which had their roots in Mexican music, with the A minor, G7, F and E circle of chords, and the typical slapping right hand of the *huapango* (a style of song and guitar developed in Mexico after the Spanish Conquest). When I heard the flamenco guitar, I realised that it wasn't so much Mexican music which attracted me, but rather the roots of Mexican music in Spanish music, more specifically, in flamenco.

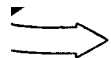
I was fortunate to find a teacher in Seattle who had lived and studied in Spain with the legendary Diego del Gastor from Morón de la Frontera, in the province of Sevilla; even before his death, Diego achieved cult-like standing for his unique Gypsy style. Before my teacher moved away, I received a fair musical and technical foundation to work from and, most importantly, I learned what a flamenco guitar should sound like.

Sabicas, arguably the greatest flamenco guitarist of all time, once said that to become a professional guitarist one should play for dance for ten years, learning the rhythms of each *compas* (the rhythmic structure of flamenco), followed by ten years of accompanying singers, learning the harmonies and tonalities of each song, along with its *compas*. This would give the guitarist enough knowledge with which to work for the next ten years on becoming a soloist.

Like most non-Spaniards, I did it backwards, because there were simply no singers or dancers to work with in Vancouver. I focused exclusively on the guitar - I found that the singers on my records got in the way of the guitar-playing, and would usually turn down the volume since I found the *cante* (song) quite annoying! It wasn't long, however, until I fell in love with the *cante* and realised that it was the very heart of flamenco. Since I knew that I would never be a flamenco singer, I decided that learning to accompany was the next best thing.

In 1975, I received a Canada Council Travel Grant to study the art of accompaniment in Spain. I went to every festival I could, frequented flamenco *peñas* (members-only clubs dedicated to the preservation of pure flamenco) and private parties. I hung out with the best of them and lots of nights drank with the worst of them, until nine or ten in the morning. Usually I was the only foreigner at these events and they were quite curious about *el rubio canadiense*. So they would test me. When somebody sticks a guitar in your hands at four in the morning and says, "Play *so/eares*" because he wants to sing, you better be ready! In a situation like that, you learn how to survive as a guitarist, and what you don't know, you fake! I guess I acquitted myself quite well as I was invited back and more singers would ask me to play for them.

At this time, I met and studied with Diego del Gastor himself, and met Tomatito, today a highly



respected guitarist, when he was only 16 years old  
- and a relative unknown.

I was in Spain for about eight months and on my return to Vancouver I received a call from Teo Morca, one of North America's most famous flamenco dancers. He had moved from L.A. to Bellingham, and invited me down to his studio to get to know me because he had some contracts in the works and needed a guitarist.

Still feeling good about all my wonderful experiences in Spain and my greatly improved playing, I rolled into his studio in a pretty positive frame of mind. When I left about two hours later, I was a thoroughly chastised individual and not so sure of myself. Of course, what happened is that I was broadsided by the wonderful world of flamenco dance, with which I had little experience and certainly none at the level of Teo Morca. There are certain signals that dancers employ to communicate with guitarists, but I'm afraid every time he dialed me he got a busy signal! Although he was very good about it, I decided I would have to go back to Spain to avoid similar humiliations in the future.

That's how I came to be in Madrid in 1979 and how I met Rosario Ancer. I learned that flamenco dance and music are very different from any other style of dance and music in as much as the dancer doesn't follow the music, but rather the music follows the dance. This is perhaps an oversimplification and, of course, we both work off each other, but basically this always holds true. That's why taped music won't work in flamenco. It would force the dancer to follow the music - the dancer would lose their freedom - and without freedom they couldn't dance flamenco.

My role as a guitarist is to follow the dancer's footwork and its *compas*, and to follow the tonal variations of the singer at the same time. I

support the singer and we are both there to provide a foundation for the dancer. Even though this might sound very confining, it isn't. I can improvise, play my own variations, play other guitarists' *falsettas* (melodic variations on the *compas*), or do whatever I like as long as what I do is in *compas*, since that is what gives the piece its structure and enables all the elements of flamenco to come together.

In a typical dance, I start playing the guitar in a tone that has been previously agreed upon with the singer. After some guitar introduction, the singer makes his *salida* - usually a short phrase or two to establish his voice and the tempo, and then the dancers make their entrance. Most dances consist mainly of *cante* and sections of footwork. Normally, there is no singing during the footwork and conversely, no footwork during the song, although this depends very much on the particular piece which is being performed. Some dances, like *bulerias* and *rumbas*, are not very serious and tend to have few rules, and even these might get broken, depending on the mood of the performers.

The dancer nevertheless sets the general tone and direction of the piece. A good dancer *sabe mandar* (knows how to command) the guitarists, singers, and *palmeros* (the ones doing the hand clapping), so that he or she is in control and running the show, rather than the other way around.

Even though I have freedom when I work with dancers, I am, of course, even more free when I am playing a solo. After so many years of learning to accompany *el cante y el baile*, I am back where I started, and am again focusing on my solo playing. Having learned so much from other sources, I am now composing my own material - and self-expression is really what flamenco is all about.

## THE PERSONALS

Rosario Ancer

### Where Flamenco Is

According to my astral charts, my life was destined to be ruled by passion and it didn't take long for dance to come into my life. Mama Lolita, my grandmother, told me that she used to see me when I was two or three years old trying to sing songs and holding the ends of my dress, moving from one end of the room to the other. Then I would curtsy, and repeat the whole process. She feared that I might end up a dancer, a profession not exactly encouraged in the social milieu where I grew up.

I was born and raised in a small town in Northern Mexico, in a family of 11 children. The only cinema in town belonged to my father and it was right next door to our house. Since I got in for free, I spent almost every night watching movies from faraway places, with fascinating people doing wonderful things.

When I was ten, I saw Lola Flores singing and dancing flamenco in *De Color Moreno* and other movies, and before long I was trying to imitate her style. She was called *La Lola de Espana*, and when she died last June all Spain paid tribute to her. She was also in the recent film, *Sevillanas*, by Spanish film director Carlos Saura.

Later, the life of Isadora Duncan also affected me profoundly. Isadora's free-spirited approach to dance and to life, along with the immense joy of her dance and the intense sadness of her personal life, moved and inspired me. I wanted to be like her.

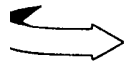
I, too, was a rebel in life, but a quiet one. I was, for instance, the first woman in my family to actually have a paying job, at a bank. My father didn't stop me, but he was never pleased to have one of his daughters out in the work force. It's not that I didn't believe in getting married and having kids like my sisters and friends did at an early age; the idea of being a mother always appealed to me, but it had to be on my terms. My life, however, changed considerably with my father's death, followed three years later by my mother's. As the oldest of six remaining unmarried children, I now had the responsibility of helping raise them with my grandmother.

We moved to Monterrey for the children's higher education and the first thing I did for myself was to find a flamenco dance teacher. There had been no teachers in my home town; up to then, my only experiences of dance had been participating in dance events at school and in local celebrations,

which I had done since age five. As I walked into my first class, the teacher came up to me and asked me if I was a Gypsy. In those days, Gypsies had a reputation (mostly unjustified) for stealing babies and generally anything of any value which could not be nailed down and, of course, I denied it. Later, I found out that it was really a compliment, and looking like a Gypsy has certainly helped me in my dance career.

Similarly, when I was in Spain, my teachers would all tell me that I looked like the prototypical Andalusian woman. Andalusia, the southern part of Spain, is the birthplace of flamenco (which has its roots in East Indian, Moorish, Sephardic, Arabic and Gypsy cultures). As it happens, my father's side of the family came from Lebanon to Mexico at the turn of the century, and my mother was a mix of Spanish, Mexican native, Indian and Sephardic Jew.

There wasn't a lot of opportunity to see professional flamenco companies in Monterrey, so when I heard that Manuela Vargas and her company from Spain, one of the best flamenco



dance companies touring worldwide in the seventies, were going to be in Mexico City, a group of friends and I flew down to see her. It was the first live flamenco show of this magnitude that I had ever seen, and it was magic - the appearance of this regal woman, with enormous power of expression, brought tears to my eyes. That's when I knew that I wanted to express myself in this way.

After three years of training in Monterrey, taking two classes a week, I needed to dance more. I wanted to breathe and eat flamenco. I wanted to be where flamenco happens every day. I saved what I could and sold all my possessions and within a year I was in Spain.

I went straight to *Amor de Dios* (Love of God), the mecca of flamenco dance students, and the most famous and professional of all dance studios in Madrid. The best-known teachers give lessons there and it is usually where the heads of dance companies look for new dancers.

One of my main teachers and mentors was Maria Magdalena, famous for her flamenco technique classes (which is what I now use to teach my students). She appeared briefly in Carlos Saura's *Carmen*, as the teacher of the class where Don Jose, performed by Antonio Gades, discovers Carmen. My other teacher and close friend was Ciro, famous for his unique

choreographies and wonderful footwork. Both of them were always very supportive and encouraging, as they thought that I had talent and a natural ability to interpret the essence of flamenco. I also studied with Mercedes y Albano, Carmen Mora, La Tati, Carmen Cortes and, in Seville, with Manolo Marin. All of them are great teachers and artists.

The complexity and intensity of my flamenco classes were at times overwhelming and many nights I thought about returning to Mexico but, as soon as I entered the studio for my morning classes, my resolve returned and grew stronger. Of course, the more that I learned, the more I realised how little I knew!

For the Spanish girls studying flamenco, most of whom were professional dancers and completely familiar with the art form and its culture, they were just dance classes. For me, a foreigner, they were much more. I had to learn a whole other culture, its songs, its music, its traditions. I learned that each guitarist and singer has their own way of interpreting the *compas* (the rhythmic structure of each dance), so you need the knowledge of the inner workings of their rhythmic and musical structures, which never change. I learned that a dancer is also a musician, in that our footwork, *palmas* (clapping), castanets and even our dress and arm movement, have to be

synchronised perfectly with the other members of the group.

After an intensive year of training, taking four or five classes a day, I made my debut with Antonio del Castillo and his Spanish Ballet, *Danza*. At that time, he was one of the leading dancer/choreographers in Spain, and combined classical, modern, and traditional Spanish dance to create his own unique style. We toured Spain, Portugal and Italy, where we appeared in an opera production of *Carmen*, as well as on tv, and I was given the role of Lucia in *Amor Brujo*, choreographed by Antonio, to the music by Manuel de Falla. From Antonio, I learned a sense of line and an economy of movement, and I find these principles even more important to me now than then.

When the tour ended, I was invited to join *Tablao Arcos de Cuchilleros*, a flamenco nightclub in Madrid. For me it was like school, really, because I learned so much. Six nights a week we did very traditional flamenco with singers, guitarists, *palmas*, and a lot of improvising. I knew that I was living the true passionate flamenco of my youthful dreams when one night after the show, in the dressing room, the dancer on my left picked up a chair and the one on my right grabbed a big stick and they tried to get at each other - with me in the

middle! Apparently, one had stolen a dance step from the other, who wasn't too happy about it.

*Tablao Arcos* also introduced me to the politics of flamenco and the never-ending power struggles. Pachón, an old Gypsy who was the artistic director there, took me under his wing, and since I was the new girl on the block I needed protection! There is a certain pecking order in *tablaos* and the older 'hens' usually try to remove some of the feathers of the newly arrived. After a while, however, I got along quite well and it's amazing how much I learned just watching my fellow dancers night after night. Each one had their own style and personality. One of my favourites was Luisa, a Gypsy who came from a family of artists with a long tradition in flamenco.

It was during this time that I met a long-haired, bearded, blue-eyed guy carrying a guitar; we fell in love. Victor Kolstee, one of the original flamencos in Vancouver, had come to Spain for a couple of months to take some lessons and buy a few records. He ended up staying for five years. We got married and had a daughter along the way.

Motherhood opened a world of feelings and emotions unknown to me. Alejandra made me stronger

and also more vulnerable at the same time, and this was reflected in my dance. It is only now, however, in my early forties and after more than twenty years in flamenco, that I've really found my own language to communicate with through dance. Flamenco singers, guitarists and dancers get better with age, since the most prized possession of any flamenco is the freedom of expression of feelings and emotions, something which only comes with age and experience. It makes flamenco a powerful force which, if used in a positive way, helps you grow strong and confident. The real challenge is to find one's own form of expressing emotions: that is what flamenco is all about, whether it's singing, playing guitar or dancing.

The three of us went to Mallorca, where Victor and I had found work with *Paco Mundo y Maria Velasquez Ballet Espaiiol*, which included a contract for a tour of South East Asia. This contract gave me a lot of experience in classical Spanish dance, performed to classical music by composers like de Falla, Albeniz and Granados, as well as in regional dances like the *jota*. Mostly I danced in group numbers, but I also did some duets with Paco.

When this tour was over, we'd had enough of being on the road with a small baby, and when I got pregnant with my son Antonio, we came to Vancouver, Victor's home town. My English was almost as bad as the weather!

I gave my first dance lessons here in Vancouver and never imagined that teaching would fulfill me as much as it has. Victor and I were very pleased that Spanish singer Jose Lara, an old friend of Victor's, was still living in Vancouver. The two of them had worked together in the seventies. Also Gerardo Alcala, a guitarist from San Francisco, and dancer Oscar Nieto, from L.A., had both moved to Vancouver. We joined forces and for the first time Vancouver had a group of local professional flamencos. My Annual Flamenco Festival was begun as a way of promoting interest in this dance form, and I never dreamt there would be such a warm and overwhelming response.

Our timing was right, and even though a lot of our jobs are in restaurants, or are for fundraisers or private parties - "entertainment," in other words - I enjoy them and they keep me in shape. It is the theatre, however, which I enjoy the most, particularly the smaller, more intimate stages. When the lights go down and I feel the energy of the audience, when the music, song and dance become one, and when I am no longer myself but rather part of this powerful force which is flamenco, then the magic starts. And sometimes, when we are really fortunate, the *duende*, the ancient soul of flamenco, comes down to visit us.