

Fiery flamenco served

Osende outstanding in third-annual Valentine's show

By ELISSA BARNARD Arts Reporter

Maria Osende is spellbinding as she takes flamenco dance to a high art form.

For the third year in a row her company wowed a Valentine's night audience enjoying wine and tapas at the Flamenco Valentine at FRED Café and Art Gallery. The entire show of musicians, dancers and singers evokes a night in Spain when everything is wrong but life is rich.

Without losing any of the passion or power in flamenco's folk roots, Osende uses her entire body as a kinetic sculpture to rapidly and profoundly express emotion, story and images.

Only her black hair is held motionless in a rigid bun. The rest of Osende is caught up in a force field of music and emotion — her fierce face, long, curling fingers, the spectacular, fluid arms, hips in an angular twist, back arched impossibly back, feet pounding. It's very exciting and the company got a standing ovation Thursday night.

Daniel MacNeil opened the evening with a sweet, fluid guitar solo giving way to two female dancers in a celebratory and competitive encounter in traditional flamenco language.

Then the tall Osende, who can draw herself up like a pine tree or hunker over like a hurt bird, appeared in a grand white dress with a scallop shell pattern. As she languorously twisted and sinuously bent and curved she recalled a fantastical sea serpent. Her mixture of lean, hungry limbs and intense, rapid footwork led one viewer to say, "I find myself chewing the inside of my mouth."

The second act started with Osende's piece Martinete for four female dancers — Osende, Irena Dumicz, Martine Durier-Copp and Lynn Gallant. Sitting stiffly in chairs they started to create rhythm with their feet and spoken Spanish. Then their heads and arms started moving in dramatic beats. One by one the women stood up showing off their prowess, challenging the others, hostile and competitive, as if they were the peacocks strutting for the peahen.

Martine Durier-Copp, a dancer and palmista with a charmingly expressive face, looked worried when the three dark queens, two with castanets, urged her to get up as the final player in the drama.

There are many voices in Osende's tempestuous tapestry. Janis Dawson's violin has its own song. The sound is aching and sweet, very evocative and fluid. Neither too precise or too loose, Dawson's playing matches the sinuous and dramatic quality of Osende's style.

Enrique Rojo "El Henry" sings in the traditional hard-bitten flamenco way, sometimes just as a kind of groan, other times as a bark from a tormented soul. It's very affecting.

Performing with Osende for the first time is singer Antonio Pigot, traditionally not a flamenco artist and the only blond woman on stage. Her melodic soprano melted the heart in Quereles Con Paso Doble; however, Pigot's voice lacked the raw Spanish

intensity in the Tangos section where the meaning of the song didn't translate as clearly.

Osende, a former ballet dancer, is blessed with powerful percussionists in Chris Cookson on cajon (box drum) and palmas (clapping), Glenn Fraser on congas and Martine Durier-Copp on palmas. Even guitarist MacNeil became a percussionist beating the strings of his guitar during the Alegrias, Osende's final solo with a black skirt that widened into a huge tablecloth for a savage and celebratory, exquisitely controlled, storm of movement.

Apart from her body Osende dances with her exotic Spanish garments that hug her body then flare out at the bottom. In Seguiriya she appears initially as a grieving woman wrapped up in a black shawl. She spins and whips the shawl around. It becomes a swooping bird, then a butterfly, then is tossed back on her body as a lifeless piece of armour. .

The company ends the night with a playful Fin de Fiesta in which each player including the musicians attempts flamenco with high spirits and comic results.

With the Maria Osende Flamenco Co. art illuminates and ennobles a dark world.

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