



Frill-Seekers

Photos: Chris Neely

Lyn Palmer gets fit via a foot-stomping good time . . .

I have to say, I quite like to dance. Over the past few years, I have searched long and hard for a form of dance that doesn't require a male partner, being that the majority of men I know are mostly capable of a side-to-side shuffle step or some Tigger-like bouncing, and would consider anything more technical 'a bit gay'.

I've tried waltzing (requiring a male partner); boogie-woogie (requiring a male partner); salsa (requiring that elusive male partner); and even my beloved Argentine tango – but guess what? You got it!

So, when a dance instructor utters the golden phrase: "Nooo, you don't need a partner for this," it's music to my ears. It's flamenco music, to be exact...

My only experience of flamenco up until now has been a rather lacklustre performance at a hotel in Puerto Alcudia. I sat by the pool and wished myself elsewhere as, up on stage, a pixie-like medallion man in tight trousers gyrated and glowered around three half-hearted, sniggering girls. Safe to say that the type of fare you get served up in Spanish holiday resorts is *not* flamenco.

And so, in the hope of repairing the tarnished reputation of this dance in my eyes, I meet up with experienced instructor

Maureen Connolly at The Crescent Arts Centre, Belfast, for my own personal introduction to the beautiful art of flamenco.

As I hop into a gorgeously weighty, fabulously frilled skirt borrowed from Maureen, she gives me a quick historical run-down: "A lot of people think of flamenco as mainly Spanish in origin, but it's primarily Andalusian, and has much wider influences even than that. The Moorish culture has an influence on flamenco; the Romany culture has an influence; Arabian, Islamic and Cuban, as well as Spanish – it incorporates a *lot* of different cultures."

True flamenco also combines acoustic guitar playing, singing, chanting, dancing and staccato handclapping. The flamenco dancer performs with passion, but always strives for grace and dignity. The guitars and the rapid rhythmic handclapping set the scene, though the dancer does not necessarily begin right away, but waits, absorbing the music until inspired to dance. "Flamenco is very different from other Western music," says Maureen. "The rhythms are different and the singing is different. Some people aren't aware that there is such a thing as flamenco singing



– but, sometimes, it's even more important than the dance.

"When you're dancing, understanding the music is crucial; because the music is very expressive, very passionate."

There are more than a dozen varieties of flamenco songs and dances. Some are named after the Andalusian towns in which they are popular: *granadinas* (Grenada), *malagueñas* (Malaga) and *sevillanas* (Seville). But, while flamenco dances may differ with the performer and the location, they all have one element in common – emotion.

Maureen agrees. "There are many very different styles of dance within flamenco, because it's expressive of the entire range of human emotions. You can have up-beat *alegrías*, which people sing and dance when they're happy and celebrating. And then there are dances like *soleas* or *siguiriyas*, which are very soulful, which people dance

when they're in pain; when they're grieving.

"So flamenco is not just one form of dance – it's expressive of the whole human condition. And it's a great way of releasing any kind of emotion that you're feeling inside."

Suddenly, it's my turn. Maureen decides to show me some of the steps she's been working on with her beginners' class. We start off with a simple walking action, requiring a high knee-lift to make the skirt swirl; and I can't resist swishing a few extra times, for good measure. "For flamenco, it's essential that you wear a long skirt," says Maureen, "because you need to learn how to move it and work it, within the dance."

We then move onto progressively more complicated moves, including hip action, arm positions, head turns, twirls and some very nifty trademark foot-stomping. I can't believe how much there is to remember all at once, and feel like a bit of a klutz. But

despite this, I can also feel the haughty attitude of the flamenco dancer creeping into my movements (which leads to some rather odd facial expressions; but I'll deal with that another day)...

Maureen is extremely positive. "You're doing really well," she says. "It took my beginners weeks to learn this!"

"It does depend on the individual, how quickly they pick flamenco up," she adds "I find that after a few weeks, people start to love the dance; within six months, they know for sure whether it's for them or not. But at some point, there has to be a dedication to it, because it's not something you can just do once a week – it becomes a lifestyle."

And it really is, with the influence of flamenco seeping into all areas of a dancer's life.

"There's a lot of footwork and a lot of movement, so your overall fitness will improve significantly," asserts Maureen, "especially as you become more advanced. But one of the things people really notice an improvement in is their posture. Flamenco does emphasise the way you hold yourself. When I first started dancing, I had problems with my lower back, but because I have since learnt to carry myself properly, it doesn't hurt so much any more – even though I'm still dancing all the time.

"It also affects people's confidence immensely – to dance flamenco, you have to be assertive; you have to open up and you can't hide away; so as you learn to do that, your confidence as a person just grows and grows."

Like many forms of dance, true flamenco involves improvisation – spontaneous expressions of emotion. The Spanish call it *duende* – a word which means goblin or fairy; but to the flamenco dancer it signifies an inner force that fuels an inspired performance. A dancer with *duende* goes beyond technical mastery. As an observer, you don't really see good flamenco, you feel it.

As I attempt to remember the routine, maintain the staccato rhythm of the footwork and twine my arms gracefully upwards (kind of like patting your head and rubbing your tummy at the same time), I'm about as far away from *duende* as you can get. Still I feel that given time I might just, as Maureen says, grow to love flamenco. There's no male partner required, just an awful lot of practice. But you know what they say: no pain, no Spain. Or perhaps that should be: no Spain, no gain...

For more information on Maureen Connolly's flamenco classes, contact The Crescent Arts Centre on tel: 028 9024 2338 or visit www.crescentarts.org.

