



Maestra de Baile

Local flamenco dance teacher continues to pass on her legacy

She stands no more than four feet eleven inches, her smile creased with exquisite wrinkles. A master of her craft, her morena complexion glows when she speaks of it. “I’m 67 and I’m still dancing,” she says. Martita Santiago has performed and taught flamenco dance for roughly 50 years; about 20 of those have been in Eugene.

Flamenco is a dance made popular in Spain during the 15th century. Though often affiliated with Andalusian gitanos (gypsies), Moorish, Sephardic and Byzantine cultures are thought to be influential to the development of the art form. Postcolonial Latin America, particularly Cuba has contributed to flamenco dance as well. It is no great leap of understanding that the dance would find its way to the United States and into the cradle of a little girl in New York in 1944.

In Spanish Harlem where Santiago grew up, men would often take to the streets with their cajóns — wooden box drums that are a staple of flamenco music. When I asked her how her journey in dance began, Santiago confessed that her mother found her dancing in the crib. Later, at age four her mother would dress her in traditional flamenco garb and take her out to wherever the men were playing their cajóns. “People would throw coins and money,” she says, “Sometimes that was how we ate.”

The daughter of a merchant seaman, the building Santiago lived in was slated to be torn down and the family moved to San Francisco as Harlem broke and rebuilt. In S.F., Santiago danced her way through high school. “I couldn’t speak any English,” she says, and as a result she was placed in programs for the developmentally disabled. It was only through her dancing in school-sponsored events that she gained agency for herself.

Her professional training took place at San Francisco’s Academy of Ballet where she studied all forms of Latin dance. As a professional Santiago built an impressive resume, the highlight of which was an invitation to dance for President Kennedy.

In the afternoon of her life, after mothering eight children and settling in Eugene, Santiago’s journey has continued as maestra. “I’ve kept my dancing up after eight kids, now I am trying to pass on my curriculum,” she says. Her bursting pride cannot be overlooked as she speaks of her children, particularly her daughters, who take after their mother in being impresario dancers.

Rebuilding her own studio after a battle with black mold, Santiago is currently teaching beginning classes in flamenco dance at the Reach Center, Tuesdays, from 7 to 8 pm. She encourages newcomers but stresses discipline. **EW**

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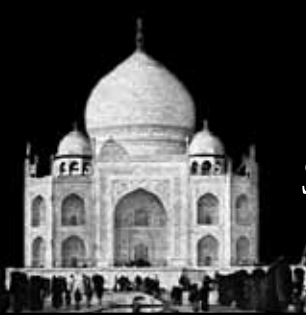
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