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Review: Ensemble Español celebrates 50 years with glimmers of things to come



Ensemble Español Spanish Dance Theater performs a 50th Anniversary Celebration at the Auditorium Theatre. (Jose Calvo)



By **LAUREN WARNECKE**

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For any dance company to make it to 50 years takes grit and guts. Few have done it with the clarity of purpose shown by Ensemble Español Spanish Dance Theater. The Chicago troupe — whose mission is to honor and elevate Spanish dance in America — kicked off its golden anniversary Saturday with an evening at the Auditorium. The program leaned heavily on beloved classics while hinting at what might come next.

Ensemble Español served as the official launch of the Auditorium's 2025-26 dance platform, which this year is specially curated to highlight female dance leaders. Founder Dame Libby Komaiko is in good company, with upcoming performances planned from the Trinity Irish Dance Company, New York City Ballet phenom Tiler Peck, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and the Martha Graham Dance Company.

Selections from Komaiko's catalog are scattered throughout the evening, some not seen since her [memorial concert](#) in 2019. Largely considered to be her greatest work, "Bolero" (1993) closed the night, as it has many, many times. But it and several others are needed to demonstrate the depth and breadth of Komaiko's artistry and vision. If there were ever a time to do "Ecos de España" (1983) again, it's now; the piece opened the evening with a burst of energy, highlighting the dark and bright layers of Russian composer Rimsky-Korsakov's "Capriccio Espagnol" with one section of flamenco, another folkloric. The simply stunning "Zapateado," (1976) was on the program, too, plus a handful by second- and third-generation arbiters of Ensemble Español's legacy.

Komaiko wasn't Spanish. Most of the company isn't. But she was obsessed with the artform and pioneered a platform for Spanish dance in Chicago.

Chicagoan Irma Suarez Ruiz has overseen the company Komaiko built with executive director Jorge Perez for a decade. And Ruiz has herself batted around the idea of retirement. She is finding it difficult to step away — with good reason. Spanish dancers are like fine wine. They only improve with age. Take Saturday's performers such as Samantha Micklewright, Jonathan Pacheco, Nalanie Molina and Matt Jalac, for example. They were but fledglings just five years ago and now consistently dazzle audiences with all the confidence and swagger Spanish dance requires. That only comes from putting the reps in. Search a little deeper down the roster, to dancers like Juan Carlos Castellon and Jose Torres, who have got decades under their belts, and Spanish dance practically courses through the veins.

They've all been mentored by Komaiko and Ruiz, who is now 65; Perez is a couple years younger. Both remain active, committed dancers and leaders, but the topic of a succession plan has been on everyone's mind. Torres was recently appointed associate artistic director and has expressed a desire to keep pushing the mission forward with fresh collaborations and new works, including a few of his own. Ensemble teased that idea this weekend, with a new flamenco piece he created highlighting deft scarf work by Abigail Mosquera.

But Saturday wasn't entirely about that; it was a way to honor the past and celebrate the present, the latter glaringly apparent in electrifying solos by Torres and guest artist Claudia Pizarro-Lara.

Torres chose to dance the Solea por Bulerias, Pizarro-Lara the Seguiriy. The latter is considered among the oldest and most somber of flamenco's patterns, rhythmically confounding and effectively gut-wrenching. Both of these dancers are mesmerizing, backed by spectacular live accompaniment from frequent musical guests Jose Moreno (guitar, vocals), David Chiriboga (guitar), Javier Saume Mazzei (cajon and djembe) and Patricia Ortega (vocals and palmas). Pizarro-Lara, a former company member, is easily one of the best flamenco artists to grace Chicago stages. The time away has only made her better.

Ruiz and Perez, too, appeared to find another gear this weekend. The typically demure Ruiz, as she appeared Saturday seated with castanets to play Isaac Albeniz's canonical "Asturias" with Chiriboga on guitar, comes out of her shell once she begins dancing — and choreographing.

Take her 2019 tour de force "Pasion Oculta," for example, which closed the first act: a modern masterpiece set to Escala's driving score for strings called "Palladio," (recognizable from its extended play in Debeers Diamonds' commercials). Rings of light (by designer Dustin Derry) follow the dancers as they chart a fast-paced course across that big Auditorium stage.

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There's also "Entra Dos Almas," a signature duet Ruiz and Perez have performed together for nearly 30 years but never fails to delight. Danced in the Flamenco Alegrias style, the bright and bouncy duet appears to depict a boisterous couple dancing through periods of communion and conflict, each dancer periodically fighting to be heard. In the end, they seem to realize that being heard requires listening, loving and respecting one another. Maybe that's how a dance company gets to its 50th anniversary.

Lauren Warnecke is a freelance critic.

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