

My Formative Years by Silvia Duran

By 12 years old, I considered myself a pianist and a good one at that. Aunty Betty, my mother's elder sister was my teacher. I was winning prizes in the local eisteddfods and Aunty Betty was convinced that I had *great* talent and took my musical education very seriously. All my mother's family were musicians, so it was considered natural that I would be an outstanding piano player. I must admit that I liked playing the piano, but truthfully, I was not really prepared to dedicate my life to becoming a concert pianist.

In addition to piano lessons, I was allowed to learn "one other thing". Ice skating seemed an option since, I had recently seen 'Holiday on Ice' and becoming a famous ice skater, appealed to me.

That same year, 1959 Antonio and his Spanish Ballet, arrived in South Africa. They performed in Johannesburg at the Empire Theatre.

What happened to me that day in the theatre was like being hit by a bolt of lightning.

I remember the entire performance.

Antonio's entrance. The stage was dimly lit. Suddenly he was there. The effect was electric. I was completely mesmerized.

Carmen Rojas, his partner, wore a long yellow tail dress (*vata de cola*); His nephew, Paco Ruiz, performed a Farruca solo, but *most* of all, I remember Antonio.

When I walked out of the theatre, I knew what I wanted. I wanted to be one of the Company I had seen on the stage of the Empire Theatre. My dream was to become a Spanish dancer. I remember saying that I would one day dance with Antonio. The reaction of all who heard, me was incredulous. I was not taken seriously. My family had other ideas for me.

"I want to learn Spanish dancing", was the first thing I said to my mother. 'Not ice skating'..

Going back a bit, in 1957 Spanish dance had arrived in Johannesburg. Mercedes Molina, a member of the Luisillo Spanish Dance Theatre, stayed after their tour and opened a Spanish dance studio.

At the time, I enrolled with other children from my class for lessons with Maya Obel. The idea of being part of a group appealed more than the actual dancing. Maya was probably the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. I don't think that she was a special dancer, but her beauty made up for it. I really don't remember anything that I learned with her and she soon gave up teaching to get married.

Inspired by the Antonio performance I decided to return to Spanish dance and take it seriously.

As luck would have it, I met Bernice Yudelowitz (later she changed it to Lloyd), a former pupil of Aunty Betty, at the very eisteddfod we both attended. Bernice was in the dancing hall, while I in the piano section, upstairs. Bernice had just returned from a year with Luisillo in Spain. We met when she greeted Aunty Betty that day. Bernice went on to open a studio and it was there that I began classes in earnest. Her studio was in the Hunstanton Building in Hillbrow. She was on the 6th floor and Mercedes Molina was two floors beneath.

Bernice was a true artiste. I was lucky. Although flamenco was not her specialty, she was an amazing dancer and it was from her I received a solid grounding; wonderful arm movements as well as a sense of line. I felt that my musicality and hers blended well. I started off very ordinarily. She was nice to me but, as I had no background as a dancer, I must have seemed clumsy and plain in the beginning. And then the class when I came out of my shell. It was a simple stamp-heel- stamp in a turn. I performed the exercise as if dancing. Bernice was surprised and excited. From that moment on I became one of her favourites.

I went on to have private lessons with Bernice who taught me a dance for entry in the novice section in the eisteddfod. The name of the dance was "Serenata". My mother made my beautiful costume by hand and I still have it. Black and white stripes with three frills edged with wide torchon lace.

I was excited and practised every spare moment I had. The dance was without castanets giving, me a chance to "show off" my hands. Even then, my arms and hands were my best asset.

The day arrived for my first stage appearance. The stage in the Johannesburg City Hall was old and worn. The adjudicator sat at a table opposite, with one of the "buddies", a special Welsh lady, who ran the eisteddfod.

I performed as if in a dream and finished third.

I graduated from the Novice Section, with a prize. Next time I entered the eisteddfod, I would have to compete in my own age group, with experienced dancers.

This happened six months later in the Dance Festival with David Poole (ex-Royal Ballet and one of the Directors of the University of Cape Town Ballet) as adjudicator. He was well known for his biting tongue and tough criticisms. I competed with experienced ballet dancers of my age, among them Wendy Goldstein (later Maxine Denys of the Royal Ballet). I had had no ballet training and very little experience other than one performance in the novice section 6 months before.

I did my best, but obviously was not in the same league as the other contestants. Poole summarized my performance to the audience, with: She "moved well above the waist but had a clumsiness around the ankles for which he recommended dancing in the bathroom and not on the stage! "

This was a typical South African ballet dancing attitude when, if you didn't point your feet, you were made to feel that there was no room for you on stage in any style of dance. I was devastated and embarrassed. I went home sobbing, yet, at the same time, told myself that I would show that "horrible man".

I wasn't exactly sure how I could do this, but was determined not to give up. I asked Bernice what he meant by "clumsiness around the ankles" and she responded that it was to be expected since I had had no ballet training. "Had I learnt ballet, would it help me not to be "clumsy around the ankles"? I asked. "Of course,", she answered. "Then teach me ballet!"

And so, at the age of 13, I started my classical ballet training. I had private lessons with Bernice as well as attending class. I worked very hard trying to point my feet, which

proved difficult for me. I had "banana feet" which explained it! I was also not a natural jumper and had to work very hard in this section. My thighs were heavy and not ideal for "turn out". The only thing that I was good at was adagio, using my arms and expression, at which I excelled.

I regarded the ballet training as an aid to improve my Spanish dance which had now become an essential part of who I was. I loved my lessons and waited for each one in great expectancy. I practiced hard, imagining a career in Spain in a Spanish company. I daydreamed on the bus journey from my home in Orange Grove to the Hillbrow studio in the Hunstanton Building and back again.

I fantasized about being in the company of Luisillo or Antonio; arriving in Spain for the first time and immediately feeling at home. Not surprising, as I had already been there many times in my dreams.....

I would take my book of "Antonio and Spanish Dancing" by Elsa Brunalleschi and pore over the photographs, copying the position of the arms and hands, shown in the pictures.

This I also did with the book "Baron at the Ballet" where there was a section on Spanish dance with photographs of Pilar Lopez, Carmen Amaya, Antonio and Rosario and the Jose Greco Company with Guest Artistes La Quica and Tere Maya. Many years later I studied with La Quica and was amazed to see the same image hanging in her studio as a painting. And later who would have thought I'd be a 'daughter' to my dear Tere Maya, that wonderfully kind person and gypsy artiste with whom I performed and shared a dressing room in Madrid's "Café de Chinitas"

In SA, there was only limited exposure to Spanish dance and flamenco apart from the local performances of the Mercedes Molina Company. However, one day I was lucky enough to see the magnificent film, "Flamenco" (the Spanish version "El Duende y Misterio del Flamenco") starring Antonio and Pilar Lopez with her company.

After seeing the film, Bernice's mother commented: "When I saw that woman (referring to Pilar), I kept on thinking how much she reminds me of someone, but I couldn't for the life of me think of who it was, until it hit me: That's Sylviajane. She reminds me so much of Sylviajane!."

That was the first time this comparison was made. In later years, it was made many times, one of which was when the well-known Spanish photographer, Carlos Cabrera, came to Café de Chinitas to photograph a performance of my group. He composed two large, coloured portraits showing a dancer in a red *vata de cola* (tail dress), dancing with a huge red and white shawl. He placed one of the portraits in the window of his studio on the Avenida Jose Antonio in Madrid where my friend, the late Angel Garcia noticed it.

"Since when does Pilar spend so much money on photographs?" he asked Cabrera.

"Why, she did a whole selection! Do you want to see?" was the answer.

Angel looked at more photos and repeated how surprised he was that Pilar not only had taken time to stand for the photos, but had done so in Chinitas.

"Angel, look carefully, are you sure that is Pilar?"

It took Angel some time to realise that it wasn't.

"It's Silvia!"

Angel was stunned. After all, he had spent some time as a dancer in the Pilar Lopez Company.....

Cabrera sent me a letter recounting the episode. As I have always greatly admired Pilar I take this as a tremendous compliment. One of my few regrets is not having had the opportunity of working with her before she died. I loved to listen to Maestro Granero and Camborio telling stories of their time with her.

Thinking back, my encounter with David Poole, although traumatic at the time, was a blessing in disguise as it made me aware of the necessity of a good ballet training. I now realize how lucky I was. Starting later, having acquired a basic flamenco technique made my work more Spanish and I became a Spanish dancer wearing ballet shoes and not a ballet dancer holding castanets.

The wheel had turned full circle....

Bernice was engaged and was to leave Johannesburg and give up her studio. She transferred her Spanish dance students to the Mercedes Molina Studio. The teachers were Mercedes, Geoffrey Nieman and Rhoda Zulman (Spanish names Enrique Segovia, Luisa Cortes.)

I am grateful for what they gave me and for the many happy times enjoyed with them. However, I still look on Bernice as my first teacher who gave me my artistic conception; a true artiste with tremendous sensitivity and musicality, inherent in her every touch. I will always be thankful that she was my first teacher.

As time passed, I desperately sought meaning in what I was doing. My instincts told me that there was more than just going onstage to smile and perform well for the audience. When I think back, I realise that I was missing the freedom of allowing the music to dictate whether to look happy or sad onstage; the freedom of letting my interpretation be directed solely by the music. I had little reference to go by other than my own feeling. I looked for direction and pored over books with pictures of Antonio, Rosario and Pilar Lopez. I played records of Antonio , Carmen Amaya and Jose Greco, spending hours dancing in our lounge to the sound of these records. I built up my own world in which I was dancing on the stage with a company in Spain. I am sure that this was perhaps the main reason for my success in Spain as, from such an early age, I had lived in that world of my own making. And never forgetting the great luck of having as my first teacher the incomparable Bernice Lloyd.

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Written many years ago

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