

Carmen Romero

Perseverance

Interview and introduction by Carmen Gómez de la Bandera

Looking back, we can see that around the late 1970s and early 1980s a resurgence of gymnastics as an art form took place in Spain. Something original was found then: a mixture of styles and excitement made the world of gymnastics different, because Spanish dance and flamenco put their heels on the mat.

Spanish folkloric rhythms and movements, accompanied by classical and flamenco music, flourished during the Olympic Games. The Spanish team was triumphant. It was the era of the teenage athletes from Romania and Russia, of Nadia Comaneci's international fame. It was the beginning of dance-fusion, of the breaking down of the barriers of traditional dance - when Paco de Lucía created new music through the chords of the Spanish guitar and when a new kind of flamenco emerged from the dark taverns and 'tambourine folklore' of Franco's dictatorship, where it had long been confined.

During this development, or, rather, as part of its genesis, the figure of my teacher and master, Carmen Romero, appears. She trained the Spanish team of artistic gymnasts in Spanish dance and ballet techniques, choreography and music. She created a unique and innovative method of physical training using flamenco disciplines.

In July 2005, during the "The Articulate Practitioner" Symposium, in Wales, when Julia Varley spoke of the importance of interviewing extraordinary women and collecting traces of their work so that they do not remain hidden in obscurity, I decided to tell her story, or, rather, I decided to ask Carmen to tell it herself: a significant woman, internationally renowned, fully and passionately dedicated to her profession of dance and teaching.

Carmen continues to give classes at the Instituto Nacional de Educación Física in Madrid and at the Real Escuela Superior de Arte Dramático, where some years ago I had the fortune to be one of her students. Now she has taken up her university studies again and is working on a

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thesis on the body and expression. According to her, "Quality is indispensable in the professional field, and for this reason learning is so important. Life is a rich reserve of elaboration and learning. One must work very intensively, study, dream and try to attain the goals one has set oneself. I like Art, I have always enjoyed it and I go on enjoying it."

Her efforts have left a lasting, but silent trace: she has trained great dancers; she has been able to pass on heterogeneous artistic tendencies from Carmen Amaya's to Antonio's gipsy flamenco, passing through classical ballet and Cuban rhythms. All those of us who have had the fortune to receive her teaching, passion and love, admire her unanimously. In fact, if I had to summarise her life in three words, they would be passion, work and humility.

Carmen, how did you begin?

I was born in Granada, a town rich in folklore and flamenco traditions, and I was passionate about these forms from childhood. Little girls danced at school and in the streets. These were the difficult years of post-war Spain. There were seven children in my family and only my father earned a living. I learned from seeing: I watched my sister who was a good mirror. I joined the group where my sister taught, and in this way, little by little, I had new experiences that allowed me to enter a more professional world. But I did this without ever forgetting my roots.

My personal motto? Be humble and love your work. Be constant, because perseverance has moulded all works of art. If you want your dreams to come true, you cannot forget discipline.

Do you think gipsy flamenco is different from that of non-gypsies?

Flamenco is not folklore; the form that we know today developed in the 19th century. The gypsies adapted it to their customs and they were the first to commercialize it, but for a long time it was a familiar dance that belonged to everyone, to the streets and the taverns. Its oldest roots are lost back in time. Later each community adapted it to suit themselves and individuals have made it their own in different ways. That is why flamenco is so rich and always renews itself.

So what are the roots of your own dance style?

We can say that my professional learning starts at the Organización Nacional de Coros y Danzas of that time. I learned Bolero, and, its base, Spanish Classical Dance, with the Pericet and Tona Radeli family who have made history with this style of dance. In reality, traditional and popular dance and music were my starting point; they were my inspiration and guide to creating other dances. I remember my father's love of singing and the guitar, an instrument that he never learned to play because he had three different jobs in order to provide a living for our big family and to maintain the strict discipline he believed in. I remember the lullabies and the beautiful songs that my mother taught us in her lovely voice that was never heard outside the kitchen or courtyard walls: so many children to look after, and a husband... So little time of her own!

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The first battle that I won was my father's acknowledgement, when he saw me dancing with my sisters. In spite of his mistrust, because at that time being a dancer was not acceptable socially, I got my



The Romero sisters. Photo: Romero archive

father's permission to devote myself to dance with my two sisters and we founded the Romero Sisters Dance Company. We danced all over Spain, but our fame crossed borders and we even recorded a television programme for the BBC. They invited us to dance in England and the offer was very exciting, but my sisters and I had boyfriends, and one of them said that his girlfriend was not going. So we missed a great opportunity and what we had created with a lot of work and enthusiasm soon vanished.

What happened then?

I moved to Malaga. There I discovered my other passion: teaching. I began to teach dance at the Colegio Internacional Los Rosales. I came into contact with the Greco family. I taught the sisters Carmela and Lola Greco. Lola became the leading dancer in the National Ballet. Afterwards, the dancer Antonio asked me to be part of his Company, which at that time was one of the most important - if not *the* most important - in Spain and in Latin America. But I had to reject his offer because I was committed to my students with whom we were preparing a festival. The costumes were ready and their dreams were about to come true: it would have been impossible for me to disappoint them. But I picked up resources from this great dancer: as a child I had seen his rehearsals in the Generalife from the wings of the theatre.

I will tell you a dream: one night my feet danced in the gardens of the Generalife; it started to rain in a way I had never seen in my whole life, but I enjoyed it and went on dancing, soaked in rain and music, without being able to stop, without wanting to stop... Dreams!

Some time later, a new and important change took place in my life. At that time my sister gave me the opportunity to return to dance with the Madrid Ballet. The director had been a dancer in Antonio's and Carmen Amaya's companies, so I moved to Madrid, where I still live. I danced solo in the *Danza del Fuego* of *El Amor Brujo* by Manuel de Falla, one of the most important pieces in the repertoire of the Spanish Classical Ballet. At the end of our contract, my sister Angelita and I went to Israel.

I went on learning and discovering how important it is to build a store of practical material, to then develop your own work and elevate it to the category of art. In love with dance, I understood that to prepare

your body and give free rein to your creativity, it is important to learn how to incorporate what you can achieve from different techniques and styles. For this reason, in my method, both for the teaching of flamenco and for physical training, I have included ballet and modern dance techniques, jazz and Afro-Cuban music, and everything that body-posture techniques have brought to these disciplines.

Could we say that you are a pioneer of the idea of mixing artistic disciplines for the comprehensive training of the dancer and actress?

Perhaps. What I did was not premeditated. To develop what I pass on to my students, I was not led by a particular school, but rather guided by my love for art in all its expressions, taking something from the perception of the world that each one of these forms gave me, also because this was useful to me.

Which other disciplines are important?

One must not disregard anything; everything I express is what I have experienced personally, and I would say that a comprehensive training for an artist is multi-disciplinary. For this reason I felt the need to study drama and to graduate from the RESAD of Madrid. I also studied classical dance in the Conservatory and in music, I studied theory, piano and guitar; and when I was still in Granada I also began to study painting.

What more can you tell us about your return to flamenco in the Spain of the 1970s?

As I said, I gained knowledge from Antonio and I brought the basis of classical ballet into flamenco. Moreover, during my tour of

Israel, I had the great fortune to work with an eminent gypsy dancer from Los Tarantos, the company of the celebrated dancer Carmen Amaya, also of ethnic gypsy origin. So I was able to absorb something from his particular flamenco style. I went on learning and teaching in Madrid, giving classes to female and male dancers. My reward today is to see that there are others following the same path. I did not have children, but my nephews and nieces have taken up my legacy and have founded the dance companies *Suite Española* and *Hermanas Romero* in homage to the group that we - their mother and aunts - started years ago. They have already been working in many countries. Rafael Amargo, a young dancer who is famous all over the world, was also one of my students.

Thanks to companies like these, flamenco has turned into an international discipline and continues to develop. In this sense, as you know, one of the contributions that I have included in my teaching method is what I took from Afro-Cuban dance, especially what concerns the tempo of percussion and pelvic movements. It is also very interesting to collect movements from other folk traditions, for example the strength of the feet and the leaping of the Aragonese Jota. The mixture of the sensual tempo of the Caribbean rhythms and the roundness of the Aragonese folklore are useful to train the dancer's body, enriching their way of performing Spanish dance and flamenco.

From this interdisciplinary perspective, how was your incursion into the world of international artistic gymnastics at the end of the 1970s?

I always liked gymnastics so, when I arrived in Madrid, I made contact with the Sports Federation and suggested collaboration.



Carmen Romero receiving one of her many prizes. Photo: Romero archive

They must have found my method interesting, because they asked me to prepare choreography for the female gymnasts. I worked with them for some years, of course learning from them as well, above all preparation and discipline. Gymnastics trains your body physically and then you have to transform these movements into artistic expression. The first thing to achieve is harmony and elasticity, which you reach through technique and then the movements flow. Dance is the basis of all sports. I think that facial expression and hand gestures are also very important.

For the choreography I chose Spanish music by composers like Manuel de Falla and Joaquín Turina, which was unprecedented at that time. Then, for every

gymnast, I adapted the type of music that best suited them. Maybe this was the key to our success; this and the hard work and perseverance of the girls.

Surely the direct application of the spirit of Spanish dance and flamenco to Olympic gymnastics was your personal contribution? It is enough to remember some sports press headlines of the time: "Carmen Romero creator of the Spanish Style"; or remarks like "Some time ago the Spanish Federation conferred on her a medal for the work done during the last six years. Undoubtedly, she deserves the adjective: the best..." and also "The Soviet Union wants her to sign up..." What happened to this offer?

Yes, the international artistic gymnastic

teams were interested in the application of our dance techniques to their choreographies, after having seen the Spanish team. At that time, the Soviet Union athletes were the best at this discipline. I worked with them and, in particular, with the Romanians. At the Montreal Olympic Games, Nadia Comaneci had won seven medals and the Romanian team was very strong, so for me it was an honour to be invited to train the Romanian Olympic team. At the beginning of the 1980s they became world champions. From this experience I took gymnastic techniques that I applied to flamenco and vice-versa. The path is made of perseverance, passion and vocation.

What other international contacts or collaborations did you have?

I participated in congresses of women's artistic gymnastics in Portugal and there I took part in the staging of *La leyenda del Minotauro* with Teatro Bruto. I worked in Casablanca as a flamenco teacher at the School of Dramatic Arts. I also collaborated with French schools in Lyon and with other dance centres, such as the International Dance Centre Rosella Hightower in Cannes and the International Dance School in Monaco. I have been asked several times to go and live outside Spain, but I prefer to keep my home here, although I spent several months in Japan, working in the

Iberian International Centre, teaching flamenco techniques.

Let me ask you one last question: what is Art?

I believe that it is to do something very well, the best way possible, to reflect one's soul and transmit it. That's it!

Translated from Spanish by Maria Ficara

CARMEN ROMERO (Spain) studied at Madrid Conservatory, at the Real Escuela Superior de Arte Dramático de Madrid, Málaga Conservatory, and is making a PhD in Stage Arts at the Rey Juan Carlos University. Carmen has received numerous prizes for her work and has made the record Casas Belter, Hispavox y Saet Setra, made a recording for the B.B.C. and published various articles on dance in the journal *Viva el Espectáculo*. Carmen has taught internationally in theatre and dance schools, in universities and has choreographed Olympic gymnasts.

CARMEN GÓMEZ DE LA BANDERA (Spain) was born in 1965. She studied at the Real Escuela de Arte Dramático de Madrid and at the Madrid Complutense University. Carmen has worked as an actress since 1983 in New York and in Spain and more recently as a director. She is the founder of Teatro de las Aguas and co-founder of the Madrid Association of Women in Stage Arts "Marías Guerreras".