



Peter Duitaen

# Dutch Flamenco Biennale

**Ton Maas** speaks to Ernestina van de Noort, the founder of the pioneering flamenco event that takes place every two years in the Netherlands

The Dutch Flamenco Biennale, which takes place in Amsterdam and several other Dutch cities, owes its international reputation to adventurous and uncompromising programming of both music and dance. If you want to know what the current innovators and front runners of flamenco are up to, this is the event you definitely don't want to miss.

Aspiring young choreographers like Israel Galván, Andrés Marin and Belén Maya, who had previously been largely ignored in their home country of Spain, have made their breakthroughs thanks to the Dutch Biennale. Founder and director Ernestina van de Noort initiated the festival because she was dissatisfied with the cliché-ridden way flamenco was being presented at various

*fiestas gitanas*. In fact, for several years the event adopted a strict 'no polka dot' policy. "I'm happy to say that we have dropped that rule," van de Noort explains with a grin, "because our mission of presenting flamenco as a vital and serious art form has been accomplished. Flamenco can now be heard in different surroundings, including venues for contemporary classical music, rock and jazz. The artists we present, both in music and dance, have been chosen because of the artistic risk they take in pushing the envelope. They are people who are rooted in tradition, but who are also questioning it, searching for new ways. It is that quest that I'm interested in."

Of course you can hear pure and undiluted flamenco at the Biennale, but the main focus is on innovation and dialogue. "My aim is to

reconnect flamenco with its ancient roots," van de Noort explains, "but also to expose it to different musical traditions. For the first edition I booked a pre-existing project, *Qawwali-Flamenco*, but in spite of all the major stars involved, including Duquende and Miguel Poveda, I was rather disappointed with the outcome. So I decided that from then on I would 'commission' my own dialogues." Selecting combinations that might work is done intuitively rather than rationally. Despite the 'Gypsy' connection between the Balkans and Andalucía, there is no historical evidence of any Bulgarian influence on flamenco. Yet the combination of *kaval* virtuoso Theodosii Spassov and singer Arcángel has turned out to be very effective.

The most successful dialogue-project that the Flamenco Biennale has initiated so far is



*Qasida*, a collaboration between flamenco singer Rosario La Tremendita and Mohammad Motamedi, a classically-trained vocalist from Iran. The lengthy standing ovation following its premiere at the Amsterdam Bimhuis in 2011 turned out to be just the beginning. A world tour followed, which took the project to Belgium, Spain, Austria and the US, where it was performed at Carnegie Hall. Although on paper the raw and eruptive character of flamenco and the smooth, meandering melismas of classical Persian singing are strange bedfellows, the outcome of this unusual dialogue was nothing short of magical. As with any intercultural exchange, there were minor misunderstandings as well. Van de Noort chuckles as she shares an anecdote about the project: "When an Iranian classical singer has a curtain call, he will respond with an extended encore of *tahrir* (microtonal improvisation). But when Mohammad did that during the *Qasida* tour, the flamenco musicians got really irritated, because taking a solo in a situation like that is simply not done in their world."

Another myth about flamenco that has evaporated during the Biennale is its alleged highly improvisational nature. A short documentary filmed during rehearsals for a meeting between musicians from flamenco and jazz in the 2015 edition revealed that improvisation doesn't mean the same thing to everyone. The flamenco musicians seemed rather uncomfortable having to improvise without a clearly defined structure, while that was, unsurprisingly, the most exciting part of the exercise for the jazz players.

One of the anticipated new projects in the upcoming edition is *Fantasia para Violonchelo*



Anemiek Rooyman; Pablo Guildali



Clockwise, from opposite page: Ana Morales in *Bagatelles*; dancer and choreographer Israel Galván in *Torobaka*; the project *Qasida*; and Olivier Award-winning Rocío Molina

short solo, *A Palo Seco*, mixing live flamenco singing with electronic soundscapes and elements of Japanese *butoh* dancing.

Educating the traditional flamenco audience in the Netherlands to expand its taste for mainstream and traditional flamenco has been a slow and careful process, but a successful one. "Sometimes I had to pull a few tricks," explains van de Noort. "In 2015 I booked the great *cantaor* El Pele, who is a star in his own country but virtually unknown abroad. So what I did was pair him with Farruquito, a dancer who draws a big crowd over here. By doing so we managed to sell out the biggest hall in Amsterdam, Carré, with over 1,750 seats. Now that the identity of the Flamenco Biennale as an adventurous festival is well established, I can do things I couldn't do in the past, like paying more attention to pure tradition. Many people seem to think I don't like traditional flamenco, but that's not true. It's only the simplistic 'Olé-Olé!' that I detest."

When asked why there's a two-year interval between editions, she replies that a yearly festival would be too much work for her. "That's why we introduced Intermezzo Flamenco, a series of concerts that takes place in the intervening years. It's a way to stay in touch with our audience and it acts as a kind of prelude or tapas for the Biennale itself." ♦

**+ DATES** The sixth edition runs from January 13-29 2017 across the Netherlands  
**+ ONLINE** [www.flamencobiennale.nl](http://www.flamencobiennale.nl)