

Published in *Hispanic Outlook on Higher Education*
May 2004

The Spirit of Flamenco

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Flamenco, with its unique integration of dance and music that originated in nineteenth century Spain, has a language all its own. The passionate dance fuses *zapateado*, stamping of the feet, *palmada* clapping of the hands, and *canto hondo*, meaning “deep song” that is accompanied by a guitar. Although the art form is well known in traditionally Spanish-speaking countries, flamenco has also begun to come into its own in the U.S. during the past few decades and beginning to take hold of academe as well.

The University of New Mexico in Albuquerque has one of higher education’s best-kept secrets: the only dance program with a flamenco emphasis in the U.S.

The university’s dance program offers a bachelor’s degree in dance with a flamenco focus, the only curriculum of its kind, as well as a master’s of arts degree and a master of fine arts degree that was recently added in fall 2003. The program has approximately 45 undergraduate dance majors and nearly third choose the flamenco emphasis. The number of graduate studies varies by year.

Donna Jewell, an internationally known modern choreographer and head of the dance department praises the dance department as leading the way to “integrating flamenco nationwide as a major classical form [of dance].”

Most college dance departments offer two traditional dance techniques: ballet and modern. Sometimes, jazz or tap is offered. It is rare for a department to offer a full curriculum in an ethnic dance form, if they offer any at all.

“There is never almost three equally grounded techniques in any once dance department,” says Jewell. “Here there is a cross-over of learning how to perform. This cross-hybrid program makes for a well-rounded environment for student dancers.”

The popularity of flamenco is not restricted to the dance world exclusively. As the U.S. becomes more diverse, artistic expression reflects that. Jewell recognizes that as an art form, flamenco is serving as a mirror to our changing society.

“Flamenco is growing in leaps and bounds and has become part of our consciousness as a nation,” Jewell explains.

The University of New Mexico's flamenco dance program has a perfect home in Albuquerque since professional flamenco artists live in the region. Because the larger community has had experience with the art form, they have an appreciation for it. Donna Jewell calls it a "collective understanding." As a result, flamenco is very popular with audiences in Albuquerque and surrounding communities.

The inspiration behind the flamenco program at the UNM is Eva Encinias-Sandoval, the only full-time flamenco faculty member and founder of the Ritmo Flamenco Dance Company. The department has adjunct faculty members who also teach flamenco, including Sandoval's daughter, Marisol Encinias.

Jewell gives great praise to Sandoval for both her abilities and her commitment to the UNM dance program. "She's a master," says Jewell.

Sandoval is from a three-generation flamenco family and began dancing at the tender age of five. "It was so integrated into our daily routine that it is difficult for me to remember when and where the formal training began," she says.

Sandoval's grandmother and mother were flamenco dancers and passed the tradition on to her. She then taught the art to her son and daughter, Joaquin Encinias and Marisol Encinias, who are also professional flamenco dancers themselves today. Flamenco was and still is, a family affair

"I was always captivated by the art form," Sandoval says. "Early on, I knew that would spend my life exploring flamenco."

At age 12, Sandoval took her first trip to Spain to study with flamenco masters and soon began visiting Mexico and other parts of the U.S. to gain a higher level of training. By age 14, Sandoval was assisting her mother in flamenco technique classes. When she finished high school, she decided she needed to pursue a dance degree to fully pursue as many opportunities in the dance world as she could. Staying close to home in her family's flamenco sphere, Sandoval enrolled in the dance department at UNM in 1974.

Sandoval's talent as a flamenco dancer did not go unnoticed for long. During her sophomore year in the dance program, Sandoval was asked to teach a flamenco class. To her delight, she accepted and has been teaching at UNM ever since—with the flamenco program growing with her as she matured as a professional flamenco dancer.

After Sandoval began teaching, in her words, the flamenco program "started taking a momentum of its own." First there was one beginner class and as more students took interest, additional classes were added as well as intermediate and advanced classes.

Now an associate professor of dance, Sandoval has led the dance department to its fully developed flamenco curriculum. "It is an art form that requires much study in topics that are not all dance driven," she says. "It is difficult for university dance programs to include such courses in their course offerings."

The variety and levels of technique offered in flamenco at UNM is what makes the program one-of-a-kind. Three levels of flamenco technique (beginning through advanced) are offered. Dance majors in the flamenco emphasis also take “Voices of Flamenco,” a dance history course; Castanets/Classical Spanish flamenco; *Cuadro* (flamenco structure); *Bata de Cola* (flamenco technique using the traditional long dress); *Abanico* (flamenco technique using fans and the Manton-shawl); *Cante* (flamenco singing); and *Cajon/Palmas* (percussion and hand-clapping techniques. Students also take related courses offered in other departments such as Flamenco Guitar, the Art of Spain, and Chicano Literature.

Dancers at UNM can perform in Alma Flamenca, a student flamenco dance company, which Sandoval started in 1990.

“Flamenco is a very individual art form,” says Sandoval. She saw the need for students to assert their individual flamenco style so founding the student ensemble was an ideal way for them to exhibit their individuality and gain valuable performance experience.

Members of Alma Flamenca have 50-60 performances each year held on the UNM campus as well as at fairs, conventions and schools in the Albuquerque region. Alma Flamenca has even performed in Washington, Dc. In September 2000, the company was chosen to perform in the nation’s capital as the New Mexico State representative in the "Celebration of States." Renowned flamenco artists Omayra Amaya and Joaquin Encinias have choreographed for the group.

Dance majors in the flamenco program also have an exceptional opportunity to study abroad during their junior or senior year. They can travel to Spain to study with flamenco masters in Granada, Sevilla or Madrid.

The creation of the annual Festival Flamenco Internacional has brought the flamenco dance program at UNM to even greater heights. It has been known for this annual flamenco festival held on campus each year since 1987.

“I felt that many student dancers were lacking in the stylistic possibilities of the art form,” says Sandoval. “I wanted to find a mechanism to bring flamenco guest artists to the university.”

Sandoval’s opportunity came when the chair of the dance department asked her to develop a special evening of flamenco for the fiftieth anniversary of UNM that year. They decided to turn the event into a festival with some five-day flamenco workshops and three performances. After its tremendous success, the festival became an annual event at UNM. Flamenco students in the dance department participate in the festival as well; the opportunity to study with flamenco artists worldwide is unprecedented on a college campus.

As the logistics of organizing the Festival Flamenco Internacional became more complex due to greater popularity, Sandoval formed the National Institute of Flamenco, a nonprofit organization devoted to furthering the art of flamenco throughout the state of New Mexico. Through educational and performing opportunities, the institute's purpose "is to root, examine and educate the world in a language: flamenco." In addition to co-hosting the Festival Flamenco Internacional each year, the institute also offers year-round classes in flamenco dance, guitar and singing through The Conservatory of Flamenco Arts.

Now the Festival Flamenco Internacional is collaboration between the UNM, where it is held each year, and the National Institute of Flamenco. It has grown to be a two-week long event with 20-25 course offerings and flamenco and several performances.

Numerous internationally known flamenco artists from Spain participated in the Festival Flamenco Internacional in 2003: Joaquin Grilo, Mercedes Ruiz, Rosario Toledo, Chuscales, Lili del Castillo, Francisco Javier Orozco, and Pedro Cuadra. Mexican flamenco dancers Mercedes Amaya and Santiago Aguilar came to the festival with their daughter Karime Amaya and son, "El Tati." Maria Laura Manzella hailed from Argentina and U.S. natives Joaquín Encinias, Marisol Encinias, Ramona Garduño, Mele Martinez also participated.

The 18th annual Festival Flamenco Internacional will be held June 10-20, 2004. The roster of participants for the festival this coming June is still underway, but if past success is any indication, it will provide the usual exceptional educational and performance opportunity for flamenco professionals and enthusiasts from around the globe.

"This positive cooperative effort has allowed for growth of the festival while bringing much acclaim to the university and its excellence in arts education," says Sandoval. "Today it is known as one of the top three flamenco festivals in the world."

Sandoval says that the flamenco festival and the flamenco program at UNM enhances campus life immeasurably since it offer opportunities for students to learn flamenco who would necessarily take dance. "It [the existence of the flamenco opportunities] enhances the learning experiences from across UNM who would not otherwise have a dance interest." says Sandoval. "I have dance students studying chemistry, medicine, architecture, etc."

Among Sandoval's many students is Gretchen Williams, who is in her first year of the master of arts degree program. She chose UNM for her graduate degree because of the "strong flamenco community." Williams describes UNM's flamenco program in one word: "intense."

Williams, who has a bachelor's degree in anthropology, hopes to use her degree to inform others about flamenco through writing. She notes that there are not that many flamenco performers who are also academic writers. At UNM, she says uses her anthropology degree "everyday" as fieldwork is fundamental in that field. Because Williams is dancing

and performing flamenco daily, she is in a living fieldwork experiment. Flamenco is an integral part of her graduate studies and the flamenco program at UMN is her playground.

“I really see a deficit in the field of flamencology of writers with any experiential knowledge of the art form,” Williams says. “I feel that that will be important if we want to continue to grow—we must educate both outside dancers and outside audiences.”

Williams has already gained substantial experience in the flamenco program even though she has only just finished her first semester. Under the tutelage of Eva Encinias-Sandoval, she has accumulated experience teaching, performing, singing, and in all aspects of producing a flamenco performance including lighting and costuming. Williams says that one of most valuable aspects of the program is getting “a lot of personal attention from people with several generations of experience.”

“I have learned as much if not more outside the studio and classroom as within,” she says.

Students like Gretchen Williams will one day carry the torch and pass on the spirit of flamenco to other dancers and educate communities throughout the world about this distinctive art form.

“Flamenco requires a huge commitment,” she says. “But as with anything, the harder you work, the greater the reward.”