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Flamenco as a narrative language in Antonio Gades "Blood Wedding" ballet .

1. Introduction.

1.1. Antonio Gades and flamenco

Antonio Gades ballet *Blood Wedding* was a turning point in dance history: flamenco becomes an independent stage language.

Gades said referring to his **Blood Wedding** version:

"I am born in a mediterranean culture, which is all about jealousy, love, hatred, and this exists not only in our dance

but also in literature, painting and other arts. The feeling of tragedy is always there. *Blood Wedding* (...) is a tragedy wrapped up in folklore. I am always interested in Lorca's work, because he describes with deepness and intensity and intention andalusian people"¹

His sober choreography of this ballet is in line with his aim.

As García Lorca with poetry and Manuel de Falla in music, Antonio Gades considered flamenco as the expression of the wisdom of a people and his quest for rendering its core was similar to the purpose of the poet and the musician in their fields: as he said

"In Spain Flamenco was sold out in a way that I did not like, because this meant to prostitute the culture of a people. It was necessary to remove all the bad taste glittering, spangles, narcissism, to let its essence shine"ⁱ

In his dance style this meant sobriety, but engaging all the body and all the presence of the dancer in the movement, and a minimal choreography and scenery.

1 Antonio Gades, in Redescena website: <https://www.redescena.net/espectaculo/16987>

He was one of the first flamenco male dancers to engage arms and hands, as he learnt from one of his masters, Vicente Escudero, with whom he also has an astonishing physical resemblance.

Like him, Gades also sought pure lines in his dance, as straight as his self discipline in practice, which was his basis for feeling totally free when seeking inspiration for a choreography.

Antonio Gades was somewhat criticized for using “too few” steps in comparison to more modern flamenco dance style, but his aim was not to use “few” or “many” steps, only the ones to express the message of his dance.

He felt that in flamenco one single gesture tells much more than 20 pirouettes and that its expressive force comes from contention. The scene in *Los Tarantos* with Carmen Amaya just sitting and rhythmically knuckling on the table can give an idea of what he meant.

He used to say that he started to dance because he was hungry, and always considered himself just a worker.

Out of self respect, respect for the dance as a culture and respect for his audience, he only wanted to give his best on stage, make

his audience feel that the time they spent watching his choreography was really worth of it, and never cheat them: if he danced a folk dance, he would not trivialize it, and if he danced to a plot, his dance would serve the story and not to showcase his ego.

He hated the idea of the flamenco dancer as a beautiful person posing with no further purpose.

A dancer for him was someone capable of squeezing out all the emotion from a movement, and there is no need of being young, slim and attractive to do that.

For him, dancing a folk dance had nothing to do with wearing a typical costume and reproducing its steps.

One has to know the story behind those steps, when and why those dances were originally danced, because they are the expression of a world vision.

For example, flamenco *zapateado* (footstamp), in his words, "Is not percussion, is the continuation of a feeling. You cannot stomp on the earth. If you stomp on the earth, she gives you nothing, nor music, nor wheat"ⁱⁱ.

He defined this attitude as an “Ethic of the dance” and always acknowledged his master, the bailaora and choreographer Pilar López for having taught him that.

Antonio Gades belonged to a generation of specially gifted flamenco artists, as his dance partner Cristina Hoyos, Camarón, Paco de Lucía, Mario Maya, Carmen Amaya, Enrique Morente... who have a similar story: they started very soon for the need to find a way out from poverty, yet they never sold out their art principles for easy money and easy applause.

For example, Cristina Hoyos recalls she was asked to shorten her skirt and smile more even when performing a solemn flamenco dance like a *soleá*, as a condition for a contract, which she refused to do.ⁱⁱⁱ

Instead, they were constantly trying to improve, in order to become better professionals, and being offered more work and the better salaries they needed.

And when they reached their goal and went on international tours, or had classes with renowned masters, they met other personalities of the artistic and cultural life (Gades became friend of Picasso, Rafael Alberti, Alicia Alonso... among others.), so flamenco led them to the culture they had not accessed to as

young kids, and opened to their inspiration a wide range of creative possibilities.

As talented as they were, they ended up creating outstanding artworks, reached a worldwide public, and possibly planted the seeds of the designation of flamenco an “Intangible Cultural Heritage” by UNESCO on November 16th 2010, only two days after what would have been Antonio Gades birthday, on November 14th.

1.2. Federico García Lorca drama “Blood Wedding”

Bodas de Sangre (“Blood Wedding”) is the first of a drama trilogy by Federico García Lorca connecting andalusian popular culture with the greek tragedy.

The story is based on a real crime happened in Níjar, a little andalusian village: on the wedding day, a former boyfriend of the bride rapted her, and soon after was killed by the husband-to-be.

García Lorca could see through real events, as the Níjar crime of love and jealousy, the roots of the ancient mediterranean culture

as they are represented in greek classical theatre: the tragic collision between the “Unsaid, unwritten, unshakeable, timeless Laws of the Gods”, of love, hatred, revenge, eros... and the codified human laws of behaviour and social convenience.

Tradition and moral rules are unable to silence the unwritten ones, yet powerful enough to scare and punish anyone who breaks the code, social anthem and unhealthy feelings of guilt and duty being the means to tame the savage timeless passions.

In between, the tragic characters are trapped into an agonic inner fight, being unable to resist the call of the unspoken laws, and therefore headed to social punishment, as happens in **Blood Wedding**, or to lifelong deadly self repression.

Thus, in Lorca’s drama, the Moon, (the unexpressed emotion and unconscious mind) gets frozen and needs blood to warm her world again^{iv}.

The innocent husband-to-be in **Blood Wedding** “*has to*” become a murderer to re-establish social order, and his own mother gives him the knife for his mortal fight.

That’s why in **Blood Wedding** the characters are named after their social roles: The Bride, the Groom, the Mother, the Neighbour,

Leonardo's Wife; only Leonardo, for being the catalyst of the social break out of untamed passion, has a proper name.

Federico García Lorca connects his drama to greek tragedy in different ways: the structure of the drama, the use of poetry in the climax scenes, as usual in greek classical theatre, introducing in the story symbolic elements and characters personifying the natural and supernatural powers, such as the Moon, the Beggar, the Wood Cutters, the three girls spinning a thread as a clear reminding of the three Parcae..

This metaphoric textual strategy allows him to deepen the meaning of the staged plot connecting it to the timeless human experience of love and death, and also provides a bridge for adapting the drama to dance, which is a connotative language as well.

And the text was just a seed.

García Lorca used to give detailed instructions about how staging and acting his works².

He knew that a drama only comes to existence on stage, in actors' voices, attitudes, gestures, costumes, scenary, music, effects...

² Federico García Lorca, *Bodas de Sangre*, CÁTEDRA ed de Allen Josephs and José Caballero

Stage elements help to convey the emotions and meanings that the written text suggests. Thus because theater is a performative art, like dance is, too.

Besides, García Lorca also could see in flamenco the connection between andalusian culture and tragedy that he depicted in **Blood Wedding**.

He was very fond of flamenco; it was the source for one of his best known poetry books, **Poema del cante jondo**.

He was friend of many flamenco artists , he was fascinated by the wide range of feelings that flamenco can express, and by its genuine poetic force .

When for most cultivated people it was just a bad taste suburban music, he organized the “Concurso de Cante Jondo”, in Granada, 1922, and a series of lectures about Theory and Play of the **Duende**, whith the aim of making his listeners aware of the artistic dimension of flamenco as a unique expression of the joy and tragedy in human existence.

2. Antonio Gades flamenco version of Blood Wedding

A flamenco version of *Blood Wedding* makes sense, since it is in line with its message and with the ideas of his author about flamenco and popular culture.

The challenge was calling up the evocative poetic text of García Lorca's drama only with dance and choreography.

Gades achieves this result simplifying to the maximum the plot: he suppresses all the symbolic elements (the moon, the beggar, the wood cutters...) and there is no scenery.

The dancer's costumes supply it, since they are dressed as peasants, which immediately grounds the danced story in a rural village, except Cristina Hoyos, the Bride, who is always in white.

Music, including flamenco snaps, zapateados, sighs and silences, as well as guitar and chorus, times the intensity of the drama and marks the transitions from a situation to another one.

Stage lighting is also essential, in solos and duos it focuses only on the performers, so they appear dancing their story alone with their feelings, with the shadows of untold instincts and social anthem behind them.

Every move, every glance carries a meaning and could not be removed without altering the sense of the danced story.

The exactitude of technique Gades was almost obsessed with is so important to him because the posture of the bailaor, the vertical line his body defines, the more lyric and rounded moves of the bailaora, the intensity of the look, the head, the hands... express a wide range of emotions, and an undefined body line, or look would by no means communicate the same.

Gades uses elements of dance theater, adapting them to flamenco rhythms and style of movement, as in the first scene, when the Mother dresses the Groom for the wedding and discovers he brings a knife... the emphasis on this finding foreshadows the fatal outcome from the beginning.

Then Leonardo dances with his Wife, in a scene of jealousy where he clearly rejects her affection, and she, in a typical revenge gesture, takes their baby's cradle away from him.

So dance tells in a few expressive steps the past and present of this couple, and the crisis they are experiencing now that they have a baby, that she loves him but he does not.

One of the most lyric scenes in flamenco ballet history is the third movement in Gades **Blood Wedding**, the pas-à-deux of Cristina Hoyos and Antonio Gades as the Bride and Leonardo, in a "Dance of the hidden love", starting with both characters distant on the stage, like alone in their respective homes.

Again dance theater and flamenco melt in their dance: they do the same moves, as one mirroring the other one, but in the distance, simulating an embrace and caresses, as wishing their beloved one was there, they are dreaming the same dream.

Then they shift to the center of stage, the dream seems to become real and they dance together a very sensual yet sober and expressive pas-à-deux.

This is the core of the plot, now the audience knows what the dark foreshadow of the Groom knife in the first scene, and the jealousy in the second are about.

In the scene of the deadly fight, Gades also make the fighters move mirroring one another, thus perhaps suggesting that love is as deep as death and they can face one another.

Gades knew that, as Alkis Raftis would say, "Dance brings in itself the history of the social body it belongs to"^v, so, in *Blood Wedding*

the popular wedding dances represent the tradition and the moral rules.

In his choreography he turns from the group traditional dances, with bustle and songs, to the duos and solos in silence or with instrumental music, to display the conflict between public social norms of behaviour with the antagonistic unspoken forces of nature and passion.

There are no words nor songs in the ballet, except in the wedding dance scene and in the ominous lullaby about a big horse that Leonardo's Wife sings swinging the cradle before he arrives.

When a chorus begins a wedding song, the dream of the hidden love is broken by, for one side, the Wife appearing, and, immediately, in the following scene, the Bride rejecting the flower crown she is supposed to wear for the ceremony.

When another dance starts, in circle, with the Bride dancing with different guests, as it is typical in weddings, other songs are played.

Also the style of the dancers becomes more loose, they imitate the popular rural waltz of wedding dances.

Then Leonardo appears, from a shadowy corner, and the dance style immediately changes, in all dancers, not only Leonardo, it becomes again sober and intense as in the previous scenes, while the song is still playing.

So, when he dances with the Bride, their dance is evidently much more passionate than the dance rounds the Bride had had during the party, and Leonardo's Wife stops it suddenly parting her husband from the Bride.

At this moment someone breaks the tense moment exclaiming "¡Viva los novios!" and all the dancers stop and pose as in a picture.

The group scenes often remind paintings for the way the dancers are placed on stage, which conveys the steadiness of the tradition.

The Bride leads another wedding dance, with all the guests, all the pressure of tradition behind her, than seems to suffer an headache and leaves the party.

A powerful zapateado of Leonardo Wife interrupts the dance, and she indicates that the lovers have escaped.

Silence, after the bustle of the group dance, fills the stage.

Then, only flamenco rhythmic snaps, one group of guests starts snapping, then another small group, looking at each other, preparing to seek the lovers.

Still in silence, they then simulate horses, with long silent steps, like a whisper on the floor.

Darkness covers the Groom and the seekers, while on the other corner of stage appear Leonardo and the Bride, as a one, on the same horse, evoked by the dancer's arm moves and by a light zapateado, the extension of a feeling, as Gades said.

Guitar breaks the silence when the Groom and the group find them.

The three characters remain alone on stage, they sigh, one after another, they assume they are letting their life go.

Silence again during the fight between Leonardo and the Groom, which takes 7 minutes of the 37 of the ballet, and is danced as in *ralenti* emphasizing the tension.

The fighters stretch to the most, their hips firm, arms and legs moves are wide, elegant, as in *danza española*, but the eyes intense look and the tension is from flamenco.

Every part of their body is controlled to make last their movement, their fight, until the last second they can sustain it.

When they fall slowly, the Bride approaches them, then looks at her hands and the blood on them and on her dress.

While they die, silence is broken by *palmas* (hand clapping) and *jaleos*, inarticulated sounds that usually are a form of showing appreciation for the performer, but in this case, after the tragedy, before the absolute silence of the end, they feel like the voices of despair, sorrow and violence that lie under this drama and that are too disruptive to be put into words or songs.

Flamenco rhythm codes convey all the chaos of untamed emotions yet keep sounding as music.

3. Conclusion

In his **Blood Wedding** sequences, Antonio Gades shows all the dramatic power that flamenco can express in just a snap or a clapping in time.

The sequences represent the plot, and the dancers' bodies are the space where the tragic conflict between social duties and telluric passion become apparent.

Flamenco, always in the borderline between rage and grace, is a cauldron that transmutes the crush of these forces into a stylized expressive and passionate dance, thus performing the catharsis aimed in the Greek classical theater.

Approaching flamenco as a complex narrative language, in Spain in the 70ies was the opposite of the mainstream "flamenco": boisterous colourful shows with hot dresses, bursting footstamps and sexually allusive poses, which is difficult to figure out as an "intangible cultural heritage".

Antonio Gades broke this stereotype fostered by régime to please tourists and, as usual, to not let people think, just enjoy and applaud, so, in his time, his version of *Blood Wedding* was much more than an artistic finding.

He showed that popular culture is by no means as shallow and noisy as its standardized image suggested, and connected to an author, Federico García Lorca, who was silenced by régime, for this reason the première was not in Spain but in Rome, in Teatro Olimpico, on April 2nd 1974.

The film version of this ballet in 1981, directed by Carlos Saura and Antonio Gades, also a classic in dance movies, showed worldwide his austere and intense rendering of flamenco, and was key to revert the trivialization of this art.

Now also the Fundación Antonio Gades keeps alive his choreographies and his Ethic of the dance.

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Now shifted from dance theory to practice as a Kundalini Dance Therapist R facilitator, focusing on the body as a bridge between earth and sky where material and nonmaterial life meet and on yoga and dance as practices to embody the spirit and spiritualize the material .

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LateFrancoRegime, PopularCulture

- i Fundación Antonio Gades website: Antonio Gades. El hombre <https://antoniogades.com/antoniogades/hombre/italia-francia-barcelona-y-madrid>
- ii Fundación Antonio Gades website: Antonio Gades Bailarín, <https://antoniogades.com/antoniogades/artista/gades-bailarin/>
- iii Interview in *Canal Andalucía Flamenco. Hijos de Andalucía: Cristina Hoyos*, <https://youtu.be/7lsc9ESxkl4>,
- iv About the symbolic Moon in Blood Wedding, see WordPress. Little Girl Productions, Meaning and Symbols in Lorca's Blood Wedding. <https://littlegirlproduction.wordpress.com/2014/05/10/meaning-and-symbolism-in-lorca-blood-wedding/>
- v Alkis Raftis, "*Le corps, porteur de l'histoire sociale*", *4th Conference of Association of Educators in Expression and Communication*, Grenoble, 1983, pp.1-12, p.2