

Beauty in motion
Flamenco flourishes in southwest Detroit
by Khary Kimani Turner
11/2/2005

Valeria Montes sends the clear message to her students: Flamenco is not easy. If you want to learn the dance, expect it to challenge you, to command your respect.

Then expect it to transform you.

Montes' aura is strong; her students, young and old, are rapt and try their best to emulate her every move: Straighten the back. Tighten the torso. Extend your arms. Develop an attitude about yourself. All the while, try not to think too much about what you're doing. Be fluid and reverent to the craft and, in time, your posture will fall into stance on its own.

This Latin cultural tradition is actually rooted in music — flamenco singers perform melodies called *cantaores* — but it's not all song and dance. Flamenco requires upper-body strength, firm abdominal muscles and a great deal of stamina. Performed properly, it's both graceful and damn sexy.

It's also a great confidence-booster for children. The kids in Montes' class clearly enjoy counting their way through dance steps, grinning ear-to-ear when she commends their posture by shouting "Olé!"

Flamenco comes in many styles, or *palos*, and Montes — who's made the art form her life's work — holds classes throughout metro Detroit. Currently she teaches at Ann Arbor's Randazzo Dance Studio and the Birmingham Dance Academy, and next month will begin a series of classes at Casa di Unidad. Montes, a native of Durango, Mexico, conducted her first series in southwest Detroit this past spring under the Living Arts program, a nonprofit center that offers a variety of arts programming for neighborhood families. For Montes, teaching at places like Living Arts and Casa di Unidad is a way for her to offer instruction within her community at an affordable rate.

Flamenco, Montes explains, is a unisex art form. It highlights the grace of women and the machismo of men. A good visual for the uninitiated: a bullfighter. Apply that image to music that is guitar-based, Latin-influenced and steeped in generations of tradition, and you have expression that is sure to entertain, communicate and titillate.

Montes mixes a take-charge demeanor with motherly assurance, and takes the craft seriously. When a student does something well, or if she just wants to energize the group, she will shout the familiar "Olé!" Do something wrong, and she may clap at students' feet until it they get right. It's a magnetic teaching style.

Guitar player Dan Parisen, a local talent working with Montes, accompanies her in one of her southwest classes. Parisen, an experienced guitarist who is relatively new to flamenco, says the art form that Montes is sharing with communities has broadened his own horizons.

"The best part is just being part of a tradition," he says. "Flamenco is very conversational. You could meet with a flamenco dancer and fit right in."

Montes was drawn to flamenco because she liked the freedom and fluidity of the dance. She moved from Mexico to southwest Detroit in 1995. Though she danced a little in her home country, she took a greater interest after moving here, and studied under legendary southwest Detroit dance instructor, the late La Dama Maria del Carmen Montes (no relation). Maria's training style, Montes says, was classical Latin dance, not flamenco. But her wisdom, and the cultural essence she embodied, was priceless. She was a mother figure to the entire community.

Maria passed away last year. Montes and many of her contemporaries say her passing leaves "a big hole" in the community.

"Most of the dancers in and around Detroit studied with Maria del Carmen," says Mary Herbeck, dancer and guitarist for the band Alquimia Humana (Human Alchemy). "Those of us who are performing now are her legacy, and we are creating awareness of the art form. I think, in Detroit, flamenco is a secret, but it's slowly spreading throughout the city."

Montes says she's taken many of Maria's teachings with her.

"I took classes from her until the last moment," Montes says.

And her teaching style will continue to evolve. Montes points out that flamenco is an art that she, though an instructor, has not yet mastered. It's not meant to be mastered — the art form leaves room for lifelong learning. If it all seems complex, don't worry.

"You don't need to know all kinds of crazy footwork," Montes says. "As long as you get the feeling, you are amazing."

Montes will present a Tablao Flamenco show on Dec. 2 at the El Comal restaurant (3456 W. Vernor, Detroit). To register for one of her classes, call 313-595-1540.

Khary Kimani Turner is a freelancer writer. Send comments to letters@metrotimes.com.