DANCE REVIEW

A Flamenco Exercise In Watery Risk-Taking

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

José Costas's face is tense as he performs "Solo," a marvelously witty premiere that Susan Marshall has choreographed for Ballet Hispánico. Who wouldn't look tense, in fact, when balancing a water-filled punch bowl on one's head while doing a flamenco dance on a ramp?

At the end, Mr. Costas swings the bowl up, like a matador taking his hat off to salute a crowd. The water flies out in all directions. On Friday night at the Joyce Theater in Manhattan, Mr. Costas's triumph was no less real than that of a bullfighter's. The crowd went wild.

Ms. Marshall, as an experimental choreographer, has never been short on concept, and "Solo" is not a dance with a gimmick. It is an exploration in risk and concentration, elements faced by both a bullfighter and Mr. Costas, albeit to different degrees.

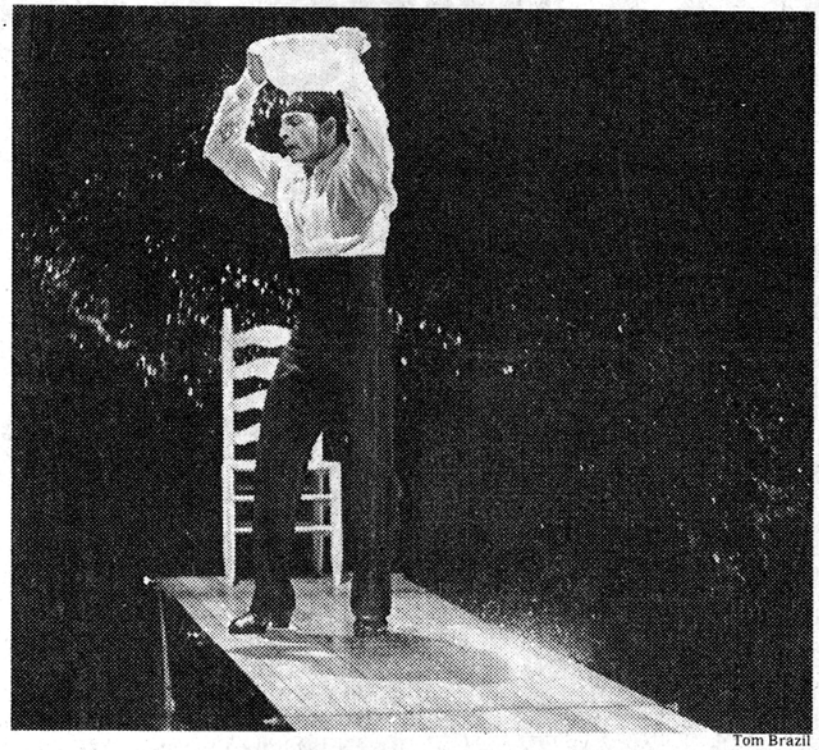
Each time Mr. Costas turns, for instance, the water splashes out and drenches his shirt. Repeatedly, the dancer must keep his balance on the ramp, which he descends and then, while moving backward, occasionally ascends. Not slipping on a wet ramp while keeping the bowl on his head is one thing. Another is to do all this while maintaining the position of flamenco heel work in distinct rhythmic phrases.

Ms. Marshall has rounded off this dazzling image by having the dance performed to guitar music from Victor Cavini's "Fiesta Andalusa."

The beauty of the piece lies in its incongruity. When Mr. Costas rises from a high-backed Spanish chair at the top of the ramp, the pale green translucent bowl, designed by John Duff, is on his knee; it looks however like a harmless globe.

But when Mr. Costas spins for the first time, the water drenches him and he looks startled. Hazard has intruded. Was the trick to keep the water in the bowl? Or is the shower part of the drama?

Simplicity is made complex here.



Tom Brazil

José Costas performing "Solo," a premiere by Susan Marshall.

Every aspect looks right: the choreography and Mr. Costas's brilliant performance, Chris Barreca's polished ramp, Lynne Steincamp's black and white costume and Donald Holder's lighting, which focuses on the loneliness of the short-distance flamenco dancer.

In appealing to young choreographers who do not usually deal with Hispanic themes, Tina Ramirez, the company's director, has stipulated that they use music associated with Spain or Latin America.

Amanda Miller, who created the program's second premiere, "Two by an Error," has stretched this condition to an extreme. Her tape collage, created with Angel Fernandes, comes from Bach, 1930's Spanish recordings, Arab-influenced Andalusian music and fragments from two contemporary musicians, Tom Zé and Paco Peña.

All this is basically extraneous to the stage activity of the cast's four women (Rebecca Jefferson, Yael Levitin, Linda Caceres and Lynne Morrissey) and two men (Pedro Ruiz, Eduardo Vialaro).

You will have to look hard to see what Ms. Miller had in mind when she wrote the program note saying that the collage refers to "religious predominance and the distant continuing relationship with Spain." The distance is rather between concept and realization.

Ms. Miller, however, is no slouch at creating complex formal structures. An American who has worked with William Forsythe in the Frankfurt Ballet, she has yet to present her own Pretty Ugly Dance Company in New York.

The new piece is more lyrical than expected but is weird enough in its disconnected moments and unexpected shapes to hint at the choreographer's imagination. There is a great deal of walking, leg swinging, changes of arm positions, tilting and reversals of direction. At one point, the women go stiff like broken dolls. At another, a frieze dissolves into an orgy of hiccuping torsos. The choreography is most interesting at its most disjointed. The program was completed by Vicente Nebrada's "Baquiné" and Alberto Alonso's "Sí Señor! Es Mi Son!"