

Flamenco's false steps



Photo: Ronald Grant

The dance has been corrupted, one of its greats tells Ismene Brown

THE name we are not mentioning hangs challengingly in the air between Antonio Gades, the old lion of flamenco, and me. We are discussing the dumbing-down of flamenco, on which he has opinions; he has bluntly described it as 'prostitution'. He has locked eyes with me, and said in a rather loud voice, do I understand the difference between making love and f**king?

He means, do I understand the difference between Gades and such as Joaquin Cortes, the hot young gipsy prancer? But we do not name him, because Gades, at 60, is a dignified man who has better things to do. "I am not going to enter this war! My silence is my protest. My work is my contribution to the debate."

Anyone who saw Cortes's catwalk-flamenco show 'Gipsy Passion' on its second British tour this spring and who then goes to Gades's flamenco-drama 'Carmen' in London next week will understand his gnomic remarks. Cortes's noisy publicity lays the glam-sex angle on with a trowel but, predictably, the gipsy can't rise to it on stage. Gades's 'Carmen' uses some of Bizet's opera, but only to make quite clear that Bizet, like Cortes, didn't know half as much about sex or dangerous women as this magnetic old-timer, who despite his prim yellow blouson jacket is clearly all man.

Gades does more than this, though - and this is the greatness of his 'Carmen'. He also makes the audience feel the mesmeric pull of flamenco itself in as pure a form as we are likely to see in a theatre, earthy, spontaneously combustible, making sophistication a dirty word, pride the only clean one.

Gades feels about flamenco as Carmen feels about her freedom. "Bizet's Carmen is false. When I first choreographed the opera at La Scala in 1957 I felt it, and when I read Prosper Merimee's original story I found she was not frivolous, not crazy. She is much more profound. She is, above all, honest and free. She would rather die than be possessed by a man just because she loves him, and she has the conscience of her class."

As an analogy for flamenco itself it is bang on. When flamenco goes yuppie, we should all be bothered.

Britain's current love affair with flamenco began in the late 1980s, when Sadler's Wells' then programme director, Tim Tubbs, gambled successfully on the post-Franco resurgence of interest in pure, people's flamenco, shedding its ersatz postcard prettiness with the roar of the great unwashed.

Flamenco has ancient roots, which as with most oral, peasant forms of music and dance, are a mystery. But it is definitively the dance and music of the poorest, angriest immigrants to Spain. Andalusia is a region of the merchant-explorer ports, Cadiz and Seville, from time immemorial sucking in gipsies, Indians, North Africans, Persians, North Europeans (the word 'flamenco' is variously derived from the Spanish for Flemish, the flamingo's posture, the Arabic for fugitive, and the Germanic for flamboyant).

FLAMENCO song and dance expressed life at its toughest and most basic; sex, violence and poverty (little of which has changed there). Solo, improvised, wholly unconcealing, there is no equivalent expressive art anywhere else in the world, though New Orleans negro jazz has similar roots.

By early this century, flamenco's proud, direct beauty and volcanic rhythms had made it Spain's most renowned dance form. Fashion and politics took hold, producing some outstanding globe-trotting performers (La Argentina, Antonio and Antonio Gades among them), but obliterating its roots in an illiterate peasantry that was mostly inimical to the 36-year Franco regime.

And all the while flamenco was untiringly plundered by everybody from classical composers and ballet companies to nightclubs on the Costa de Sol.

The 'purist' revival began with Cumbre Flamenca (it means 'Peak of flamenco'), a festival formed after Franco's death in 1975 to showcase the finest peasant flamenco dancers - they made four sell-out visits to London and set of a wave of touring non-star flamenco.

The guitarist Paco Peña added dance to his more music-based shows (his recent one, 'Arte y pasion', was magnificent), but the heavy-handed attempt by a Cumbre offshoot company, Corazon Flamenca, at flamenco-drama at Sadler's Wells last year was crucified by British cognoscenti for selling out.

We were no kinder to the Ballet Comunidad de Madrid last month, its spectacular ballet-dancers performing choreography just as speciously exploitative of flamenco as Joaquin Cortes's; both aimed squarely at international acceptability (hence the rock, fashion and Euro-ballet "fusion") rather than any true exploration.

There are many ironies here - after all, it is the Spanish who are sending out these hybrid companies, so who are we to be snooty? And after all, it was Antonio Gades, with his flamenco-drama films 'Blood Wedding' (1981), 'Carmen' (1983) and 'El Amor Brujo' (1986), who is as guilty as anyone of leading this pure peasant form into more upper-class entertainment zones. (Some also sneer that Gades, unlike Cortes, is not even Andalusian.)

Nigel Hinds, Sadler's Wells' present programme director, says mastery makes an exception to any rule: Gades has a genius for narrative understatement, so that you can read 'Carmen' both on the dramatic level and as an expression of flamenco dance itself.

GADES is no stick-in-the-mud. He argues that, like Carmen, flamenco can wear other dresses (even Armani ones), but it should be proud of being "popular" - as in "of the people". Spain, after all, is only a political entity for four separate peoples: Castilians (the majority), Basques, Catalans and Galicians, each with its own culture. Popularity, says he, is good; populism is bad, and tourism is the presiding devil.

'Look at airports or international hotels - you would never know if you were in your own country or London or Paris or Tokyo. Tourism has gone wrong. At the beginning its aim was to enable you to participate in the culture of another country; an Englishman in Latin America had to make an effort to understand them. Now what he has at home is transplanted over there. Culture has become a whore, to be used when you feel like it.'

The fact that we are discussing this in a Japanese hotel in Paris somehow adds ballast to his argument, rather than undercutting it. Gades has remained more sympathetic with the common man than with the Hilton guest. To dance flamenco under Franco while unable to celebrate its powerfully subversive messages must have entailed many compromises.

In 1975 he quit his country and career in despair when Franco sentenced five Basque opponents to death. Three years later, when he agreed to return to Spain to set up the Spanish National Ballet, it was with the aim of rescuing lost strains of regional dance. His researching of flamenco's 65 separate song-types has helped provide it with a permanent academic record, and it should survive whatever fashion or politics can throw at it.

What Gades cares about is, ultimately, true of any kind of art - that the audience trusts their honest reactions to what they see. 'You cannot explain flamenco, you can only feel it. It's like love - the chemical component hasn't been discovered for it, and that day that chemical component is discovered, feeling will be over.'

'Carmen' opens at the Peacock Theatre, WC2, on May 15, until June 3