

A mover and a shaker



Ismene Brown meets Joaquin Cortés, the 'gipsy sex-god' who aims to rescue flamenco from the tourists

THE champagne waits in the ice bucket in the hotel suite, the publicity shots lie ready for inspection, downstairs in the lobby the journalists are flocking hungrily for their interview slots, but Joaquin Cortés has heard a siren call. He's nipped out to a cafe to have some chips, if I wouldn't mind waiting, says his press representative winningly.

Unspoken in her plea is the subtext - Joaquin is a gypsy, impulsive, fascinatingly unpredictable, a child of nature, and we'll forgive him, won't we? I think of that sulky, dark-stubbled face in the poster, those winged eyelashes and passionate lips, and decide, yes, OK. This guy has come from nowhere; he's been hyped from anonymity into Valentino, Nureyev, Casanova and royalty rolled into one, and presumably all this fame is hard to handle. Let him have his chips.

For the next half-hour the representative is on her mobile phone, in the lobby, the bar, in the lift, in the corridor outside his suite, charmingly refusing requests to expand the press-ticket list for Joaquin's four-night Albert Hall run (which begins today, presented in association with the Daily Telegraph). There are 200 worthy people *not* getting free tickets. Not even Michael Flatley has got in - "the Lord of the Dance" turned away from "the new Valentino", think of it.

More than 30,000 people have bought all the seats for Cortés's six shows - it sold out so quickly that he added extra matinees. Yet hardly anyone really knows who he is. He's a flamenco dancer, he models Armani, and er... he's a gipsy sex-god.

What can explain his draw? Not just crack publicity, surely. Magic? As his suite door opens, and that pointy chin appears, I wait to be mesmerised.

Joaquin Cortés is not wearing Armani, as far as I can judge, even though he has a second career as a model. He is in baggy black nylon sweats and a pair of notably large and well-used trainers. His hair is long, his forehead high, his eyebrows lovelier than Elizabeth Taylor's, his nearly-black eyes are narrow and tip-tilted, as is his nose, and his chin, which is braided by a beard so finely calibrated that it must take ages to shave each morning. His large cream teeth are unbelievably even and well-matched, and he lisps slightly. He's neat, but not pungently erotic.

He has a loud voice, and his delivery is as self-possessed as a company executive, his "message" all about how dance is too much "an elite form for the privileged minority" and his invented rock-flamenco-ballet fusion will bring it to "a new young audience".

He's 27, and, while successful in Spain for years, has only become a worldwide media figure in the last 18 months, thanks to Gypsy Passion's effect on Spain, Italy, New York, Los Angeles, London and points east. Far from being fazed by his new jetsetting life, he says, the nomadic life suits him, being a gipsy. This may not be the first outing for this diverting remark.

As we discuss, through a interpreter, his status as sex symbol - which he expertly neither brandishes nor disclaims - he darts the question at me: do I think he's a sex symbol? This is the other side of gipsy "mystique", that spot-on psychological acuteness that makes gipsies such successful palmists and fortune-tellers. He's sharp. But he also comes over as level-headed and serious.

Cortés, it seems, is accepting one Spanish stereotype - the ultimate gipsy - in order to shatter another: that flamenco is the only way the Spanish can dance. His family are poor Cordoba gipsies who moved to Madrid, but even urban gipsies turn to flamenco at every major point in life, from baptisms to funerals. In theatres, though, he thinks flamenco has become "a tourist dance", its traditions worn away by cynical repetition.

It was because of his sensitivity to this that he turned to ballet at 14 - he was good enough to be offered places by the Vaganova School in St Petersburg (the Kirov's school) and the Joffrey Ballet School in America. Not wanting to leave home, he settled for the National Ballet of Spain, and became a leading dancer there, before going it alone at 20. He has, it seems, an "unquiet personality" which does not take kindly to the "robotic" nature of ballet.

He tells me, "I don't think I'm good-looking" (which I don't believe), and "I don't think I'm the best dancer in Spain" (which I do believe). The fevered claims are made by his publicists, he insists, "I'm just here to do my own thing, tell my own story - I want to create a new type of dance culture in Spain, to make it more for the people, not the minority."

He hasn't seen much other modern dance, a bit of William Forsythe and Pina Bausch; his primary materials are

ballet, "stylish, elegant and cold", he describes it, and flamenco's "soul and warmth" - plus a youthful pleasure in flash, sex and spectacle. He hopes the result will be a new dance company of world class, something sharper than the international known Cumbre Flamenca, which he respects but finds fuddy-duddy.

He acknowledges that flamenco's singular profundity and intimacy may not survive the inflation to a 40-strong troupe, arena-sized halls and audiences miles up in the gods, but "it's a risk that must be taken."

HIS female partner, Aida Gomez, a classical ballerina from the National Ballet of Spain, says Cortes is a one-off - no other dancer has attempted this virtually incompatible combination of ballet and flamenco, Spain's two chief forms. There isn't much modern dance there, and young Spaniards had almost given up serious dancing. Cortes's choreography offers them a new way to present themselves, she says.

The fact that this new way seems to depend heavily on Cortes himself stripping to the waist and being touted as "scorchingly/ sensuously/ blisteringly" this or that, may prove a liability; the dancer himself says he doesn't intend to have a long career. Not with modelling and film-acting now jostling for attention.

"I've no intention of dying on stage. I want to retire at the same age as Christ, 33," he says, with bafflingly bad taste. Not a practising Catholic, he enjoys people harking on his resemblance, with that natty facial hair, to popular religious images of the other JC.

He hopes in 10 years' time to have a huge house in southern Spain, with his own beach and dance studio, stuffed with horses, friends and family, including masses of his own children.

His sang-froid in the face of such explosive success is hard-won, he says. "To come from my background, very poor, to be catapulted into this new life, is not easy. But you think and reflect as you go on. One thing is straight, I want to stay sane. I might go mad in terms of my ambitions for dance but it's important to keep my feet on the ground in terms of everything else."

Thinking about "everything else", I ask has he got a jealous girlfriend back home? Loud laughter, and a "she understands that my professional career comes first at the moment" routine that is so transparent that it's endearing. Then he adds, "I'm a very faithful person."

Within the new Valentino's throbbing, sweaty, naked breast, it seems, lies a heart dedicated to patriotism and family values.

Joaquin Cortés is at the Royal Albert Hall, Thurs-Sun. Cortes is featured in 'Spanish Steps', an exhibition of flamenco photographs by Nacho Pinedo, at the Icon Gallery, Connaught Street (0171 262 2971) (opened Oct 8)