

Noche Flamenco serves up a universe of human emotion

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AMHERST - At the beginning, Noche Flamenca used darkness to reduce the vastness of the Fine Arts Center.

Three singers and three dancers huddled in a broken circle at stage right, their figures lit weakly as if by a campfire. Rhythmic clapping "palmas" stood in as the night's background noise, while hands fluttered in flight.

And then one by one, performers stepped forward to sing passages of mournful flamenco songs, or to move in ways that hinted at the percussive dance sequences to come.

Wednesday's performance by one of Spain's most successful touring flamenco companies was first planned for the smaller Bowker at the University of Massachusetts, to provide a more intimate setting for a music and dance that lives on its ability to speak, one to one to viewers. But would there be enough seats?

Over in the cavernous Fine Arts Center, lighting by Adam Gabel succeeded in shrinking the space to the distance of swirling scarves. A full house hung on the subtle, existential stories rendered by three male voices, three profoundly accomplished dancers and a solitary guitar.

As the opening work "La Plaza" made clear, the company understands the importance of creating a context for flamenco. In it, Noche's star, Soledad Barrio, and two guest dancers, Antonio Rodriguez and Juan Ogalla, scaled their performances back to feints and poses to the intimacy of friends watching friends.

Then, the prelude complete, stage lights came up and the company arranged three singers across the back, beside one of the world's most accomplished flamenco guitarists, Jose Valle Fajardo, known to his world as "Chuscales."

Across the next two hours, it was Chuscales' strings alone - along with song and clapping - that lent rhythm and melody to a half dozen theatrical pieces.

The bearded Rodriguez, in his Solea Por Bulerias, enacted an entire, unspoken drama. Dressed in a white suit, he raised his arms in a gesture at first appearing tight and defiant. His heels pounded out an invincibility, then gave way to that emotion's other half - uncertainty. In a few minutes, his piece threaded the needle of this art's complicated syncopation, from fluttering steps in hummingbird time to a tidal lilt.

In one half-second gesture, he turned to the audience to check in on what he knew would play as a whimsical step. He took the end of another moment, and mimicked use of a bullfighter's cape.

Though he was alone on the stage - save for the three men in black singing in turns behind him, and Chuscales furiously picking away at the guitar - Rodriguez' gestures summoned other figures onto the stage.

In flamenco, there are no one-sided arguments. The other person, unseen, is always just inches away.

In his solo, Ogalla, a native of Cadiz, Spain, stepped slowly out onto the stage and instantly won a staring contest with the audience.

His Alegrias piece is one of flamenco's happy dances, unlike the Solea that Barrio, the female company leader, would close the show with.

But in Ogalla's rendering, happiness is a relative thing.

His performance contained moments of utter boldness, as he worked his height, his fitted white dress shirt, his knotted scarf, his long

and his boots as martial weapons.

Not surprisingly, Ogalla brings studied technique. At this level of performance, though, technique must serve something greater, so intent.

In her long, closing solo, Barrio, dressed in widow's black, began a slow descent to emotional ruin. She is a compact woman with flamenco technique. In her chosen piece, however, she restrained herself.

By exhibiting only flashes of fast footwork, she asked viewers to imagine the distress that lies under a widow's public acts.

Stories are always implied in flamenco, for the songs - performed soulfully here by Manuel Gago, Emilio Florido and Trini da la I narratives.

Flamenco stories arrive fractured and shifting, like crystallized moments of sorrow and supplication, betrayal and guile, flirtation a

They canvas a universe of human emotion. When presented by a troupe as expert as Noche Flamenca, they are the world.