



Sara Baras's Voces, Suite Flamenca is a tribute to six legends of the genre, from Paco de Lucia to Camaron de la Isla — all of whom, she says, 'made me who I am today'

Flamenco superstar lights up the night in the shadow of maestros

Spanish dancer Sara Baras radiates feeling with every move she makes

JANE CORNWELL

On a summer night in La Granja de San Ildefonso, about 80km north of Madrid, a crescent moon hangs above an open-air theatre on whose stage seven musicians have gone quiet. A sold-out crowd sits forward until, on an amplified wooden floor, comes the rat-a-tat of steel-tipped shoes.

"Ole!" shouts someone. "Guapa!" yells someone else, and

A blur of green tassels, a windmilling of arms, and there she is: Sara Baras, one of Spain's biggest flamenco stars. Alone in the spotlight, her dark hair scraped into a bun, giving us the you-got-a-problem glare of the gypsy soul, the sort of look that would stop a bull at 50 paces.

Behind her and the seated musicians (a sextet of male and female dancers is offstage) loom six headstone-like panels, each sporting a black-and-white portrait of a bygone flamenco legend.

Singers Enrique Morente and Camaron de la Isla, the latter with his trademark shaggy hair and beard: guitarists Moraito Chico and Paco de Lucia: dancer Antonio Gades — who famously choreographed a version of the opera Carmen — and wartime singer and dancer Carmen Amaya, whom Jean Cocteau called "black rain beating against a window". There are icons who have fed the reputation of flamenco, a traditional art form from the Andalusia region of southern Spain that mixes singing, dancing and guitar playing with vocal cries, handclaps and finger clicks — and is deeper and more complex than its Spanish tourist board cliche.

"I wanted to thank these maestros for showing flamenco to the world," Baras, 44, tells me after she has signed autographs for fans and posed for photos with the local mayor and VIPs. "They all made me who I am today.

Voces, Suite Flamenca is the latest show to be directed and choreographed by Baras, who leads her company of 14 performers including guest artist (and husband) Jose Serrano, a dancer whose ferocious chest-puffing solos capture the wild *furia* at the core of flamenco. Having played international venues including Sadler's Wells in London and the New York City Centre, Voces opens in Melbourne this week - eight years after Ballet Flamenco de Sara Baras graced the Sydney Opera House with the acclaimed show Sabores.

The audience at La Granja seems to be familiar with each idol. Spanish-language recordings of their voices — hence the title punctuate the performance, like spirits called up by Baras's per-

cussive zapateado stomping.

For Baras, her every move radiates feeling, from her curving torso and right-angled elbows to hands that circle fluidly from the wrists, her fingers tracing curlicues. Controlled emotion is her thing, too; her upper body stays erect as she glides across the stage. lifting her skirt while pummelling the floor, as if to reveal the mechanics of the dance, its force. Or she'll simply shake her head hard then pause, arms overhead, an eyebrow raised, oozing flamenco

"I used to try to impress with greater speed or the most complicated turns," she says. "But now I think you can have the same intensity just by standing still and being quiet. The concentration with each show is immense but this is what we live for." A smile. 'To leave our soul on the stage."

It's nearly lam when we meet, and Baras is remarkably fresh and animated for one who has just been dancing vigorously throughout a two-hour show. Having changed out of costumes including abstract florals, tailored trousers and, for a tension-laden duet with Serrano, a sleek maxi dress with polka dots (not for her the long ruffle trains of the flamenco stereotype), she's wearing a flowing orange jersey and let her hair

"I love performing," she says. "I could dance and dance. It's making a show that's exhausting. Doing the choreography. Unifying the music and the steps. Involving the set, lighting and costume designers. But we have a good team, very organised," she continues, lighting up as her tour manager brother brings us a bottle of rum and two glasses.

"Most of us have been working together for over 20 years so that makes it possible for me to give time to work and family.

One of four children born to a father who was a colonel in the born de la Isla had the same impact on the world of flamenco in the 1970s as, say, Pele had on foot-

Before him there was Amaya (the only one of the six Baras never met), a Romani born in the Barcelona slums who escaped war-torn 1930s Spain to become an international celebrity, acting in films, dazzling packed houses with her footwork and taboobreaking penchant for performing in pants.

"Flamenco obliges you to be free to express what you feel," says Baras. "I couldn't care what the purists think of me. This company respects tradition but we have our own way of doing it."

Baras started learning flamenco when she was seven in a class at her school for children of military personnel. The teacher

'It's important for young girls to have strong role models. And my art has always let me defend women'

SARA BARAS

Spanish military and a mother who ran a dance academy, Baras grew up in the ancient port city of Cadiz, a strip of land on the edge of Andalusia almost entirely surrounded by sea.

Along with nearby Jerez de la Frontera and the Triana quarter in Seville, flamenco is said to have originated in Cadiz, the genre's mix of gypsy, Arab, Jewish and Andalusian culture evolving out of persecution and poverty into a vehicle for expressing anger and sorrow and reinforcing cultural identity. Passed down through generations, flamenco has gone in and out of fashion.

The six trailblazers represented in Voces brought flamenco into the mainstream: de Lucia revolutionised flamenco guitar by introducing the saxophone and the Peruvian cajon, that box-shaped percussion instrument played while sitting astride and slapping

the front and back with the hands. The hoarse, emotional voice and intense charisma of Cadizwas her mother, Concha: "Her achievement was to make sure all us little girls didn't copy the moves blindly, that we felt them as individuals and let our own personalities emerge.

Her father, Cayetano, a stern army man, started a scrapbook devoted to his daughter that very soon bulged with photos, programs and newspaper cuttings. Through the decades he has continued to do so. "He is a bit square and methodical but he's a softie where his daughters are concerned. He keeps my files labelled by year in his study, and brings them out to show his friends."

Sara as a child, perhaps, a member of youth dance group Los Ninos de la Tertulia Flamenco. Sara aged 18, winning a television talent contest. A 20-something Sara performing with big-name flamenco companies - most notably guitarist Manuel Morao's Gitanos de Jerez — and dancing to accompany the great experimental cantaor (flamenco singer) Morente. Then there's Sara winning prestigious awards; Sara debuting her own company in 1998; Sara's image adorning a set of Spanish postage stamps. Sara as a TV presenter, catwalk model, tourist ambassador ("The Face of Andalusia"), film star (a dance cameo in Mission: Impossible 2) and the model for a Barbie doll, part of a Mattel-inspired initiative

for children at risk. "They modelled the Barbie on my figure, on a real woman's body." She smiles, jokingly flexes a bicep. "It's important for young girls to have strong role models. And my art has always let me de-

fend women. Of the 12 shows Baras has created to date, several have taken women as their theme, from Juana la Loca (the story of the daughter of Spanish monarch Ferdinand II of Aragon) and Mariana Pineda (the protagonist of Federico Garcia Lorca's play of the same name) to Medusa, la guardiana (which gave the mythical priestess a new dimension).

She dedicated Sabores to her mother, who came out of retirement to dance in the show's Los Angeles run in 2006.

"My mother was my first teacher and my biggest inspiration," says Baras, who recently moved from Barcelona back to Cadiz to be closer to her parents and siblings, who all live within walking distance. "But since I've become a mother myself I think I appreciate her even more."

Baras had never taken more than a 10-day break from dancing since she started those classes with her mother: "Everything I do has something to do with dance. Even when I'm at home listening to music, I'm thinking, 'How can I use this in my work?" But in 2010 she put her career on hold for a 11/2 years to have the baby she had been longing for.

She says fatherhood has also changed Serrano, her Cordobaborn partner of 15 years: "We've lived and danced together for a long time and our connection is incredible" — their duet in Voces is as steamy as an industrial laundry — "but now we are even more connected. I see a new maturity in him; onstage he stands like a bullfighter and you can't take your eyes off him. We play it up, of course," she twinkles. "We know with a glance what the other is

"For the Medusa show we rehearsed blindfolded," she continues. "Not being able to see each other was extremely hard but we felt it was important to keep a space for improvisation. That's what keeps us fresh, keeps the tradition alive."

To this end, Baras feels that flamenco and jazz share the same sensibilities: "They both respect the roots, then go off in their own

Baras, after all, is renowned for the sort of volcanic, anything-goes footwork more associated with male flamenco dancers. Through the years her innate sense of rhythm has caught the ears of a wealth of collaborators including Russian cellist and conductor

Mstislav Rostropovich. Rolling Stones saxophonist Tim Ries enlisted Baras for his 2013 Rolling Stones Project—jazz renderings of the group's hits, featuring the likes of Norah Jones singing Wild Horses and Jumping Jack Flash flamenco-fied by Baras: "We were in a studio in New York and the floor wasn't great so they turned a table upside down and recorded me dancing a buleria (a fast flamenco rhythm) on top of that."

Even her palindromic name has rhythm.

The La Granja crowd thinks so; some people leave their seats to wander down the front and gaze adoringly at Baras. Later, the six panels are turned to reveal mirrors in front of which Baras dances alone, as if all of these legends are present within her.

"Art is so important, especially in these crazy days," she tells me about 2am. "Art reflects your country but also yourself."

She pummels her fists on her thighs, as if they were heels on a wooden floor. "Flamenco," she says, "reveals your inner truth."

Voces is at the Melbourne Festival from tomorrow until Sunday.



War and Peace is loosely staged as an aristocratic salon

High jinks with your Tolstoyan musings

THEATRE

War and Peace. Gob Squad. Presented by Malthouse Theatre and Melbourne Festival. Merlyn Theatre, Melbourne, October 18.

CHRIS BOYD

Like content-challenged comedians, Gob Squad performers really fire up only when they have people to riff off. They even lead with the wornout question of the hack standup: "Where are you from?"

The Berlin-based collective's War and Peace is loosely staged as an aristocratic salon. Several audience members are announced as they enter the theatre. Heralded, if you like.

This is not, however, an attempt to re-create Anna Pavlovna's St Petersburg soiree in Tolstoy's novel. Two hundred and ten years on, this is a time of peace, we're told. We've had 70 years of it.

The content of Gob Squad's War and Peace — its writing, its set pieces — is a sequence of tantalising opportunities missed or, at best, only glancingly hit. Structurally, the piece dissipates into entropic anticlimax. But the way the performers choose their marks, the way they wrangle and involve audience members, and the way they cope with ricocheting contributions is elite (as the sports commentators

would say). As good as it gets. Three (willing) audience members end up sitting around a table in this salon. On Tuesday evening, an international relations student named Jeff was

so perfect as the audience's everyman — a modern-day Pierre Bezukhov — that salon host Simon Will admitted Jeff looked like a ring-in. Co-star in that performance was Kerith, who prefaced her answer to a question about the nature of time with a barely audible admonition: "Just be honest." She then spoke about the lack of fixed milestones in queer time while several hundred people held their breath.

Rather than freaking out over losing control of their show, the squad revels in the scintillating haphazardness of proceedings

Personal stories from the squad are also memorable. Bastian Trost (from Dusseldorf) tells us about his grandfather, Paul, who taught him that the only person to shoot in a time of war is yourself. Paul self-inflicted the German equivalent of a blighty wound rather than fight the bad fight.

Context lends a fresh poignancy to John Lennon's Imagine, lackadaisically sung by Northern English nose-picker Sharon Smith. Even Coldplay's Viva la Vida (with its grandiloquent biblical and Napoleonic references) gains some gravitas in a karaoke performance.

Paradoxically (for such a seatof-the-pants show) the use of multi-screen AV is impressively slick. The live vision and sound mixing is excellent. It's a shame, then, that dramaturgy wasn't given as much attention.

Tickets: \$65. Bookings: (03) 9685 5111 or online. Duration: 1hi 45min, no interval. Until October 30.

Unsung heroes of the backlot

BRENDA CRONIN

Remember the evening panorama over Central Park in the original Ghostbusters from 1984? And the dramatic Manhattan skyline from the 1949 film of The Fountainhead? In both movies, painted backings often stood in for the city itself.

In The Art of the Hollywood Backdrop, to be published next month, the unsung artists who created some of cinema's most enduring images take a longoverdue bow.

Authors Richard M. Isackes and Karen L. Maness introduce the individuals who, with swaths of muslin and pots of paint. conjured up the war-torn South in Gone With the Wind and a menacing desert in The Treasure

of the Sierra Madre. For The Terminal, the 2004 movie about a man caught in travel limbo, scenic artists recreated John F. Kennedy International Airport on a backdrop that was 198m wide and 14m high.

New York poses unique challenges to scenic artists, in part because of the city's varying elevations and construction, says Michael Denering, who spent three decades painting backings for films such as Ghostbusters,

Jurassic Park and Spider-Man. "A building might start in one spot, go down a little hill and then have a subway below it." Denering says.

While New York is a perennial setting for movies, it isn't the only place captured on backings.

North by Northwest used a backdrop of Mount Rushmore. When James Stewart, in Mr Smith Goes to Washington, gestures through a window at the Capitol dome, he is pointing not to the actual building but a backdrop of the Washington

And while much of The Sound of Music was shot in Austria, the Alpine vistas in some scenes are painted backings.

Filmmakers didn't trumpet the backdrops and seldom included their creators in movie credits. The studios "had no

particular interest in advertising them because they considered the scenic backdrops or backings a kind of special-effects secret", Isackes says.

"They didn't want people to know that when they were looking at love scenes in The Sound of Music, that (the actors) were not standing in front of the actual Alps," he said. "(Audiences) were looking at a very large painting."

For decades, computergenerated imagery and green screens have been replacing scenic artists and the backdrops they painted.

But the backings haven't entirely vanished. For Hail, Caesar! — a send-up of 1950s-era moviemaking released in February — the Coen brothers enlisted some handpainted backings and borrowed a Roman landscape from MGM's 1959 epic Ben-Hur.

Movie backings, which evolved from handpainted backdrops for the theatre, were used in Hollywood as early as the 1910s and had their heyday in the 30s through the 50s, according to the authors. A number of movies depended solely on backings to create cinematic worlds; most used them to supplement location shots.

The craft was passed down among artists, staying within some families for generations. Many practitioners also were gifted landscape painters who could translate a production designer's sketch into a mammoth tableau that would look persuasive on-screen.

At one point during the 40s, MGM was so busy turning out films "they had scenic artists working 24 hours a day, in different shifts," Maness says.

The book credits George Gibson, who supervised MGM's scenic department from 1938 to 1968, as being a master of imaginary environments such as the Emerald City in The Wizard of Oz — choosing the right shade for the Yellow Brick Road apparently took more than a week — as well as real ones, such

as the Vatican. THE WALL STREET JOURNAL