

# One woman's voice

BY FLORENCE LE CLÉZIO

Palais Liechtenstein, Vienna, 11 January — The stage and its backdrop are almost pitch dark. Waiting expectantly, some 500 guests from the OSCE's 56 participating States and Partners for Co-operation hear the melancholy strumming of a guitar. Seemingly out of nowhere, a solitary black-dressed figure appears, totally immobile, yet with a commanding presence.

What follows is one of the most demanding and expressive dances in the Spanish flamenco repertoire. As the light gradually intensifies, so do the footwork and dramatic movements of Eva Yerbabuena, considered by many critics as one of the leading lights of the contemporary flamenco scene.

"We wanted to launch the Spanish Chairmanship with a memorable cultural event showing fine artistry and conveying strength," said Isidro González Afonso, Counsellor at the Permanent Mission of Spain to the OSCE. "Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos himself chose Ms. Yerbabuena because of her international reputation. She's simply one of the best."

"Being asked to dance to represent my country filled me with a great sense of responsibility and touched me deeply", said Eva Yerbabuena, who is also a choreographer and has her own ballet flamenco company in Sevilla.

While most audiences are more familiar with joyful and festive flamenco, Ms. Yerbabuena presented the emotionally heavier and deeper *solea*, which, she said, "expresses the feeling of peace and security within oneself".

"Short but powerful: that's how we wanted the piece to be," said a member of the Spanish delegation. The performance lasted barely 20 minutes, but every single second exuded intensity.

Although flamenco is popularly associated with its *gitano* (gypsy) influence, its origins are actually more diverse and complex. Scholars are still trying to shed light on how exactly the folk art emerged from the different ethnic groups in Spain's southern region of Andalusia.

"Flamenco is our unique form of cultural expression," says Ms. Yerbabuena, who grew up in Granada, one of the cradles of flamenco in Andalusia. "Generation after generation interpret their customs, traditions, environment and life experiences through it."

To find her own voice, she stages flamenco in a theatrical context, fusing together song, dance and poetry. Her productions have been performed to sold-

out crowds all over the world. One of the most highly acclaimed, "5 Women 5", explores a woman's palette of emotions and their impact on her individual growth.

There were many who were surprised at her audacity and the success of her productions, she said in earlier interviews. "Some people — especially men — wondered: 'Did she really do this on her own? Was she really capable of that?' The world of flamenco has its machismo, you know," she has been quoted as saying.

Although flamenco has never been in the entertainment mainstream, its most outstanding artists have recently started to be recognized as ideal emissaries on behalf of tolerance and respect for diversity. Joaquín Cortés, who is of gypsy origin, was recently appointed Roma Ambassador to the European Union.

Ms. Yerbabuena herself has won just about every major dance and artistic award in her country, most recently the prestigious Medal of Andalusia for her contribution to the arts.

Asked if she had a personal message for the men and women who work for the OSCE, she spoke like a true ambassador: "Strength, courage and patience."

**Florence Le Clézio is an Information Assistant in the Secretariat's Press and Public Information Section.**



OSCE/ALEXANDER NITZSCHE