

Calendar

Beauty Hurts

Flamenco Arm Technique

To paraphrase an annoying old adage about writing and paperwork, dancing is easy, except for the footwork.

Try arm work, too. Flamenco dancers, like Marisol Lopez, call their arm work *braceo*. That's the Spanish word for the curvilinear arm technique that characterizes flamenco, along with foot stamping, rhythmic hand clapping, and the lifting of ruffled skirts.

Lopez's *braceo* class on Sunday is about learning to isolate movement in the arms, hands, and wrists. She will

also work with students on *filigrana* — finger-by-finger movement.

LOCAL EVENTS

Think of the flamenco dancer's castanets and you'll understand *filigrana*'s importance.

Are you getting a vicarious pinkie cramp already? It gets harder.

"One exercise I have students do is wrist-isolation movements with their arms held out in front of them," says Lopez. To insure against cheating, the arms support a wooden pole. The arms don't move; only the wrists do.

"It's a workout," says 30-year-old Lopez. "And oftentimes I'll have students add wrist weights of one or two pounds." The weights are meant to build strength — "so that the arms are able to do whatever they have to do while the rest of the body is doing something else." You need graceful arms, but also strong arms, to carry out the dance.

Are there images that students should hold in their minds to make their arms, hands, and fingers perform better? "Yes, I have them visualize drawing a circle with their fingers; they imagine they're creating a circle in the air. I also have them imagine that they're holding a basket while they're picking apples. And I ask them to imagine that their arms are a bookshelf."

What does the rest of the body do during a *braceo* class? "It focuses on the arms. Once the arm technique is in place, then you can throw in hip movement, footwork, traveling — you know, actual dancing. But for the workshop, the body will be there only as a support to what the arms are doing."

What do arms look like when they're doing it wrong? "They're flaccid; they have no strength. They look tired. I imagine a tree with beautiful leaves, colors, and strength,

and then one branch is broken."

The opposite of flaccid is Frankenstein. "Yes, there's a subtle balance between flexibility and rigidity that students must seek. The dance requires both tension and softness. Students need to learn when to add tension and where — to what part of the body."

Some cues are supplied by the music. Lopez teaches her students to go where the music leads them. "If the music is giving you tension, you have to adjust your body to express that."

"It hurts to be beautiful" is another one of those annoying old adages, and Lopez says her *braceo* class would be useful for any dancer who must create a beautiful line by isolating arm movements from the rest of the body. One dance whose arm movements share similarities with flamenco's is belly dancing, and Lopez has incorporated belly dancing into her technique.

But belly dancers would need different music, wouldn't they? "They're basically the same rhythms, because the dances are

interconnected," says Lopez. Both have roots in sounds and movements from India. As the Indian style of dance traveled into the Mediterranean region, each culture adapted it.

The *braceo* workshop is a one-shot deal, but Lopez teaches an ongoing *Sevillanas* class. That's a popular, contemporary dance from Seville. "It's a couples dance, an opportunity for people to socialize. Both children and adults dance this particular dance." And the arm movements one would learn at the *braceo* workshop could be used for that — "most definitely."

What does Lopez recommend that people wear to the workshop?

"Flamenco shoes or character dance shoes," which have a small heel. "We aren't doing any footwork, but I want them to feel the posture, and dance shoes are needed for that."

Women should wear a long full skirt, with either a leotard or a T-shirt. "The arms are also learning to use the skirt to create a beautiful line that has to be continuous."

Optional supplies are wrist weights, a wooden pole (about five feet

long), and a nine-inch embroidery hoop. The hoop is for? "The circle that students have to create with their fingers." So the hoop is temporary reality, and then it's taken away? "Yes."

And where did Lopez herself learn flamenco? While she has taken many classes and workshops with visiting artists who have come to San Diego, and has also worked some in the Bay area and in New York, Lopez says that most of her learning has been "empirical."

"I have learned at parties and from hanging out with flamenco artists — dancers, singers, and musicians — and they have taught me the music, the rhythms. From there the body takes over."

— Jeanne Schinto

Braceo Workshop
(Flamenco arm technique)
Sunday, April 7, 2:00–3:00 p.m.
San Diego Center for
the Moving Arts
3255 Fifth Avenue, Hillcrest
Cost: \$16
Info: 619-846-5030



Braceo arm work

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Local Events
page 67

Classical Music
page 80

Art Museums
& Galleries
page 82

Theater
page 83

Pop Music
page 88

Restaurants
page 120

Movies
page 131