



Salvador Flores Loreto performing at La Viva Spanish Bar & Tapas in Chijmes. ST PHOTO: RAJ NADARAJAN

Secret messages in gypsy songs

akshita nanda

Born into a gypsy family in Spain, Salvador Flores Loreto became a bullfighter when he was eight and learnt the rhythms of flamenco before he could read and write.

Now 68 and a veteran flamenco singer, he has high standards when it comes to traditional music and dance. He tells Life!: "I hate when someone tries to show the public something that is not the real flamenco. It is an insult to my family."

Well known in performing circles as "El Titi de Algeciras" or the monkey from Algeciras, where he was born, the artist is in Singapore to teach and sing at dance studio Los Tarantos, which is located in Geylang.

The nickname "El Titi" is an accolade bestowed on the men in his family who are celebrated for their athletic leaps and jumps.

"It began with my grandfather. He jumped in a way that was so beautiful that everyone said he jumped like a little monkey, a little 'titi'," he says.

He inherited the accolade but a raging bull put paid to his fancy footwork at age 15.

"It broke my legs, pierced my chest and my back. I was in hospital for three months and for six months after that, I walked with a stick," he recalls.

At first he was frozen with despair at the loss of dexterity, but on the suggestion of his elders, slowly

began carving out a career as a singer in the traditional Andalusian style.

He moved to Australia in the 1960s to work with a dance company and is still in demand there as a flamenco singer.

The twice-divorced father of 12 lives in Perth with a longtime companion. He also paints under the name Salvador Loreto and has held solo exhibitions of his surrealist work in Australia, Europe and Asia.

To audiences, flamenco is about rigid posture, swishing skirts and flashy steps, but to him, it is the creating of a link between singer and dancer, or performers and audience, that transcends words.

"The first thing about flamenco is the song. Flamenco is a dialogue between the singer and dancer and the song is this communication," he says.

One does not need to be a gypsy to perform authentic flamenco, he adds, going into rhapsodies about Singapore dancers such as Daphne Huang, who runs Los Tarantos with her husband, dancer Antonio Vargas.

"When I sing for Antonio's wife, I have known her for only two days but the communication is real. She communicates with me so perfectly, it's beautiful," he says. "You don't need to be a gypsy to do flamenco. You need to be a human being who can communicate love for other human beings."

Flamenco songs may now convey messages about life and love, but he says they began as an entirely different kind of missive: quick warnings to fellow gypsies that policemen were on the way.

Since the songs are sung in Colo, the gypsy language, they are unintelligible to non-gypsies. Even a captured gypsy can send a message to his fellows through a harmless song, he explains, launching

into fluid trills to demonstrate.

A secret language is just one of the many defences gypsies had to perfect against the rest of society, he says. There is a stigma attached to belonging to a gitano (gypsy) clan and his people have always been the first to be accused of crime or hounded out of villages in times of hardship.

He says he was denied entry into schools as a child, even though his family was based in Algeciras for generations. He became literate only in his teens, after the accident with the bull left him with free time to take lessons from a retired schoolteacher.

The only way the gitano can survive is through music, dance and bullfighting. The last comes with the highest risk and pays the most. He thinks it is a career that gypsies are particularly suited for because of their harsh lives.

"We are three times better at it than non-gypsies because of our struggle to survive," he says. "We don't care whether we live or die."

And that makes for a great show, with the occasional tragic end.

He is proud of his origins, saying: "As gypsies, we transport music from many cultures. It's an obligation for us to show you the real feeling, the real communication between dancer and singer."

While he takes pride in forging this bond on stage, he finds it is often misunderstood by audiences.

"The ignorant can say, 'Oh, the singer and dancer have something going on'," he says with a sigh.

"But it is not like that. Flamenco is communication between human beings. It is humanity, it is not just music."

Call 6844-0893 or 9742-0637 or e-mail info@lostarantos.com.sg for more information on workshops with El Titi.