

Embodying Spanishness: La Argentina and her Ballets Espagnols

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On the night of December 3, 1931, barely six months after the proclamation of the Second Spanish Republic and the flight of King Alfonso XIII, the president Manuel Azaña awarded the Bow of the Order of Isabella the Catholic to the dancer Antonia Mercé, also known as La Argentina (b. Buenos Aires, 1890, d. Bayonne, 1936). (For a broader look at the biography and work of Antonia Mercé, see Manso 1993, VV. AA. 1990, Bennahum 2008). This was significant for a number of reasons. One, it was the first time that the new regime granted its most esteemed decoration; two, the person recognized was a woman; and three, it was given to a dancer, a profession with less prestige than other artistic fields in Spain at the time. The award honored La Argentina's extensive work as a "cultural ambassador," her role in spreading a modern image of Spain through her Ballets Espagnols dance company, and her performances in international circuits. In the ceremony in which Azaña presented Antonia Mercé with the award, the dancer became the embodiment of a new Spain, bringing together tradition and the avant-garde, the popular and the national, in short, the modern nation that emerged with the Republic. (See photo 1.)

Before receiving that long-awaited recognition in her homeland, La Argentina had been travelling the world for many years performing solo concerts and dancing with her Ballets Espagnols. They were a "Spanish style" version of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, based on



Photo 1: Manuel Azaña awarding the Bow of the Order of Isabella the Catholic to Antonia Mercé, La Argentina. Teatro Español, Madrid, 3 December 1931. Photo: Díaz Casariego. Museo Nacional del Teatro, Almagro.

national imagery and put together with the support of a large group of modern artists and intellectuals (Murga Castro 2017). This initiative responded to critics who had called for the need to curb the excessive deformation of the nineteenth-century *espagnolade* that was seen on the Parisian stage, proposing—as the writer Enrique Estévez Ortega stated—an “indigenous *espagnolade*,” which was defined as a “very Spanish *espagnolade*; that is to say, done by Spaniards, taking advantage of our own art and its extensive folklore” (1928, 188–189). (See photo 2.)

Antonia Mercé’s repertoire deeply marked the reception of Spanish culture abroad, intrinsically linking Spanish stereotypes with her dance, from the bolero school to folklore and flamenco. It was a strategy on which she had been working for some time, as we can see in her text entitled “The Spanish Dance” that Cuban newspapers had published during a tour of the Caribbean island in 1917: “As for me, I have attempted to merge two dances: the Spanish and the so-called ‘modern’ dance. I have eliminated the stridency and acrobatics of Spanish dance and have left its primitive beauty and its special meaning and colour” (Hermida 1917).

This stylization sought to steer clear of clichés: “Avoiding caricature, and refining and defining the essence of Spain, I have presented abroad a Spain that for many educated people, including Spaniards, is ‘more Spain’ than the real Spain” (“La Argentina ...” 1926, 5). Antonia Mercé’s contribution, therefore, focused on several aspects: the combination of a deeply rooted Iberian tradition on a modernized stage; knowledge of academic dance through her family; support of the intelligentsia; continued study of artistic and documentary sources; and the incorporation of other Hispanic folklore into her eclectic repertoire. Nevertheless, her statement regarding her search for something “‘more Spain’ than the real Spain” evinces the construction of a Spanishness based on the perception of the Other (Said 2002). Since the nineteenth century this process had contributed concepts such as charm, passion, voluptuousness and bravery to the stereotype, which, incidentally, was intrinsically linked to the presence and nature of the dance. Moreover, by taking on or accepting these Spanish clichés, which had originally been imposed from the outside, and projecting them internationally, they would be also applied to her benefit (Bhabha 2002). (See photo 3.)



Photo 2: Carlos Sáenz de Tejada, Argentina’s Ballets Espagnols poster, 1927. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. © VEGAP, Madrid 2019.

The definition of Spanishness at that time became a fundamental question. The last colonies had been lost in 1898. Additionally, Spain was in the middle of a serious crisis that did not go unnoticed by intellectuals and artists, who reacted by insisting on the need for national modernization through Europeanization and internationalization. In this sense, Antonia Mercé's programs merged the preservation of traditional heritage and its modernization, and spread it abroad in a national imaginary which, as an "imagined community" (Anderson 1993), defined and consolidated nationalism through its cultural expressions. Her proposal received the support of both experts and the public. The art critic and socialist politician Margarita Nelken considered that her work was the "enthronement, in European refinement, of the deepest purity of our truest essence" (Nelken 1929, 104). Other intellectuals, like the poet Federico García Lorca, while presenting her in New York, referred to how Spain's "national heart" and ancient history had emerged through the body of the women dancers, the current allegory of the "authentic" and traditional common values (1930). The assumption of this narrative by the Second Republic, which was proclaimed the following year, could be interpreted as a political identification of the powerful emotional charge that the performance of these modernized national dances had for popular audiences (Franko 2002, 11).

It is ironic to think of Antonia Mercé as a guardian of the national essences, especially when we consider that her life and professional career took place predominantly abroad. She was born in Buenos Aires, from which she took the artistic name of "La Argentina," died in Bayonne, lived for long periods in Paris and New York, and went on long tours throughout Europe, the Americas, and Asia. The national essences of Spanish dance that Antonia Mercé refers to are based on its supposed ancient origin in Greco-Roman culture and a Hispano-Muslim influence, and she classified it into three groups: Classical, Gypsy—where flamenco was located—and regional (Hermida 1917). The latter are especially relevant when establishing an almost mythical link between the dance and the essence of the nation, a well-exploited resource in the romanticism that legitimized the dancer, dressed in traditional costumes, as a representative of regional diversity that embodied a single "Spanish people." (See photos 4 and 5.)



Photo 3: Antonia Mercé, La Argentina, in *Triana*, with a costume designed by Néstor de la Torre, circa 1929. Unknown photographer. Legado Antonia Mercé, La Argentina, Fundación Juan March, Madrid.



Photo 4: Antonia Mercé, La Argentina, in *El contrabandista*, with a costume designed by Gustavo Bacarissas, circa 1927–1929. Unknown photographer. Legado Antonia Mercé, La Argentina, Fundación Juan March, Madrid.



Photo 5: Antonia Mercé, La Argentina, in *Malagueña*. Photo Mme. D'Ora. Residencia de Estudiantes, Madrid.



Photo 6: Antonia Mercé, La Argentina. Unknown photographer. Archivo General de la Nación, Dpto. Doc. Fotográficos, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

This appropriative process, by which the Spanish dancer would end up creating programs where lengthy ballets were mixed with diverse examples of adaptations of folk dancing from different Spanish towns and regions (for example, *Lagarterana*, *Malagueña*, *Rapsodia vasca*, *Charrada*, *Castilla*, *Valenciana*, *Almería*, *Madrid*) is not trivial. She also incorporated a very interesting aspect into her repertoire based on popular pieces from former Spanish colonies, like *Suite Argentina*, *Cubana*, and *La Cariñosa*, a Philippine dance, which she learned during her tour of Manila in 1929. Moreover, some of these pieces would be included in a larger work entitled *España Tropical*. Here she would stoke the imaginary of the colonial past that had disappeared in 1898 and use it to reclaim a positive Spanish influence in the syncretic heritage that remained in the respective mestizo dance forms. (See photo 6.)

With her mark as both “Spanish” and “Argentinian,” Antonia Mercé underlined an Hispanic heritage with colonial roots that integrated the syncretic dialogue with other forms of “indigenous” or local dance. Moreover, this “otherness” could be applied to the Spanish dance itself, understood as “indigenous” in the sense of “authentic,” as Estévez Ortega stated. Its vernacular value and its peripheral nature, compared to the hegemonic circuits of the canonical academic dance with their center in Paris, made it exotic. It was analogous to that of other companies based on their respective national imaginaries, like the Russian, Swedish or Viennese groups, but different. The objective was the definition of a modern Spanish dance language, based on its own bolero, flamenco, or folkloric idiosyncrasy. It was through the interpretation of those dances, with its “authentic” costumes, that the exoticness became visible to the foreign public as a visual metonymy of “Spain.” Not only was she able to avoid negative connotations during her appropriative processes, the consideration of her work as a cultural policy of Spanishness or *Hispanidad* would lead to the recognition of Antonia Mercé’s contribution as a sort of prestigious diplomatic campaign by the modern state that was engaged in promoting the brand new regime of the Second Republic. It was so successful that it would become a major reference for subsequent Spanish dance companies, even during opposing political periods and tendencies, and continues to be so today.

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Notes

1. The text "El baile español" was reproduced in the article by Francisco Hermida, "Teatro &, &.", published in *La Discusión*, La Habana, on February 20, 1917, and included in album no. 1, p. 91 of the Legacy of Antonia Mercé, *la Argentina*, Fundación Juan March, Madrid. Reproduced in Murga Castro 2017, 406.
2. This research is framed under the R&D&I project entitled *Ballets Espagnols (1927–1929): A Dance Company for the Internationalisation of Modern Art* (P. E. I+D+I Acciones de Dinamización "Europa Excelencia", funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and University – Agencia Estatal de Investigación, ref. ERC2018-092829).

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Cover photos: Left: "Dancer, Nadia Khattab, Ramallah". Photography by ASH. Upper right: Flatfoot Dance Company's *Homeland (Security)* (2016). Choreographed by Liane Loots. Performed at The Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre, Durban, South Africa, April 6–10, 2016. Photographed by Val Adamson. Dancers, from left to right: Sanele Maphumulo, Zinhle Nzama, Sifiso Khumalo, Kim McCusker, Tshediso Kabulu and Jabu Siphika. Lower right: Youth participants exploring Runyege dance of the Banyoro people of Western Uganda during Equation event at Uganda National Cultural Center in Kampala.