

Dance | Transgressive, feminist and queer artists are shattering conventions in a return to the form's anti-establishment origins, writes *Agnish Ray*

Flamenco taps its radical roots

couldn't move my hands, I couldn't lift my arms above my head." The Granada-born flamenco choreographer Manuel Liñán is telling me about the dance training he received as a boy. "When I placed my hands on my body, they had to be straight. My head had to be still – no circular movement."

Such were the rules for male dancers 30 years ago. Liñán envied the fluid, expressive movements of his female counterparts, who swirled their hands in graceful circles. For his generation, a heavily gendered education laid out strict codes for how men and women should move and look in flamenco – and conforming was necessary for progressing a career in the mainstream. "There were programmers who told me not to wear tassels on my jacket," Liñán, now 43, recalls, "because men shouldn't dress like that."

In an art form so steeped in tradition and virtuosity, one might expect certain conservatism. But flamenco was once a voice for dissent – a song of protest, a lament for the oppressed. Differing styles such as *seguiriyá* and *soleá* sing of sorrow and injustice among neglected Romani communities while the metallic beat of the *martinete* recalls disenfranchised blacksmiths who sang to the sounds of hammers and anvils. Today, many contemporary practitioners are re-embracing the radical and anti-establishment origins of flamenco, with transgressive, feminist and queer approaches shattering its conventions.

Liñán eventually built a name from his work with the *bata de cola*, the long-trained dress that female dancers are taught to use. He was in London last year with his work *¡Viva!*, which saw a troupe of men performing as female *bailaoras*, complete with ruffled skirts, Manila shawls and flowers in the hair.

Now he's developing an experimental work, set to be performed at the annual Flamenco Festival at Sadler's Wells, about his sexuality. He's also exploring the *copla*, an early-20th-century singing style which he says is full of hidden meanings about same-sex relationships. "Gay people were persecuted, so one of the ways they could express themselves was through music," he explains. "Their declarations of love became songs."

The dance historian Fernando López Rodríguez, author of the 2020 book *Queer History of Flamenco*, traces cross-dressing in flamenco and its parallel forms back to the late 19th century. Women such as Dora la Gitana and Trinidad la Cuenca famously dressed in men's clothes and embodied male identities both on and off the stage. "Today, we might understand them as non-binary or trans," explains López Rodríguez. Male performers who cross-dressed, such as Edmond de Bries, were also pivotal in aligning flamenco with the creative impulses of some of the most marginalised people.

For the dancer Olga Pericet, the earliest germinations of flamenco during that period – what she calls "pre-flamenco" – are inextricable from the changing social role of women at the time. I meet the Córdoba-born powerhouse in Madrid where she is rehearsing a new work named after the first prototype of the modern Spanish guitar, built in 1856, which Pericet sees as the birth of flamenco.

The luthier behind this revolutionary instrument, Antonio de Torres, called his creation *La Leona* (The Lioness), for the growl it made when strummed. It's an apt word for Pericet herself, a



From top: Olga Pericet, performing her work 'La Leona'; the prominent queer flamenco artist Rocío Molina performing 'Carnación'; dancers from the *Compañía Manuel Liñán*

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ferocious performer who prowls the stage with a mane of wild hair, as if marking the territory of her lair. Even in rehearsals, the muscles across her back ripple as she writhes and pulsates on the ground, later dancing a *farruca* (traditionally performed by men) in a black suit. London audiences will be able to experience this too at Sadler's Wells.

Throughout her investigations of the beginnings of flamenco, Pericet found a Spanish society in which women who earned their own money through art, performance and entertainment were considered morally questionable. The *cafés cantantes* in which they performed were known for prostitution; their bodies were subject to the male gaze as objects of desire. Amid fears about women's independence and autonomy, the flamenco dancer was rendered an alluring yet terrifying figure. "It was said that the first *gitanas* [Romani women] who danced flamenco were witches who hypnotised men," explains Pericet, "but really they were just free women."

Alongside other trailblazers such as Rocío Molina and Israel Galván, Pericet belongs to a generation of artists that has pushed contemporary flamenco into radical directions, exploring the grotesque, the absurd and the theatrical.

Molina's latest brainchild, *Carnación*, is a stormy duet with the musician Niño de Elche, in which they carry out various physical acts – dressing, undressing, beating, tying up, dragging around – on each other. The two bodies wrestle, embrace, collide and fall apart, before surrendering to a deranged, cathartic chaos. Currently touring Spain, the work has been received as a groundbreaking exploration of desire, intimacy and repression by two prominent queer artists in flamenco.

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Deconstructive approaches such as Molina's and Pericet's are saturated with movement, aesthetics and music from outside flamenco – but their revolutionary spirit recalls the primal origins of the form. Unlike more institutionalised dances propelled by French influences in Spain in the 19th century, the emergence of flamenco signalled something far more visceral and impure –

and it's this "dirty" quality that interests Pericet. "Impurity is something marvelous," she says: a "contamination" that imbued flamenco with its richness and that now charges the visceral, ancestral roar of Pericet's lioness.

Still, normative attitudes in modern flamenco are hard to shake off. Some trace these back to the mid-20th century, when the Franco regime began using flamenco to attract foreign tourism to Spain – but a cleaned-up version, devoid of its essential wildness. "The hybrid and experimental elements disappeared," explains López Rodríguez. "Some of the most avant-garde artists died or were exiled. Flamenco assumed its most conservative aspect, to become part of the popular culture that Franco wanted to promote."

Artists are addressing the lasting impact of this today. In Barcelona, I meet the founders of Flamenco Queer, which began as a grassroots project reclaiming the form for the LGBTQ+ community. Led by dancer Rubén Heras and UK-born guitarist Jero Férec, the initiative celebrates the persistence of flamenco's queer influences and aesthetics.

"We're trying to create a safe space where queer audiences can experience authentic flamenco," says Férec. I watch them at a bar called *La Federica*, where they perform against a backdrop of sparkly drapes; disco lights flicker while the singer's *quejío* (wail) intoxicates the crowd. Heras describes the project as a "reconciliation" for queer people alienated from flamenco and the repression that it became associated with.

Equally reconciliatory is Pericet's attempt to redress the power imbalance of Torres's lioness guitar – a feminised object caressed by male hands. Embodying the instrument herself, Pericet claims that eroticised female form, channelling its ferocity and power.

"Flamenco is anarchic," she says – true of both its form and its social function. And so too is the beast that she wants to embody on stage: "It's the animal that we all carry inside us."

Flamenco Festival 2023, Sadler's Wells, London, July 5-15, sadlerswells.com

Prime time for the midlife crisis

UPSTREAM

FIONA STURGES

In the new Channel 4 comedy series *The Change*, Bridget Christie's Linda has just turned 50. She recently had a birthday party – for which she had to bake her own cake – during which her husband, played by Omid Djalili, passed the time throwing sausages in the air and catching them in his mouth. Meanwhile, her joints ache, her ears ring with tinnitus and she keeps forgetting words: all symptoms, she discovers, of the menopause.

So Linda makes a decision: she will cash in the hours she has spent doing thankless chores at home and carve out some time for herself. Dusting off her old Triumph motorbike, she takes off to the Forest of Dean, where she meets an array of eccentrics and successfully shakes off her identity as a wife, mother and office drone.

The Change is unusual for all sorts of reasons: its starry cameos (Monica Dolan, Susan Lynch, Paul Whitehouse, Jerome Flynn); its deft handling of issues around gender fluidity and fertility; its seam of old English mysticism. But rarest of all is its focus on a woman struggling in her middle years. This might seem strange, given how the male midlife crisis has proved endlessly fascinating to TV writers (see: *Breaking Bad*, *Lucky Hank*, *Man Down*, *Detectors*, *Frasier*, *Men of a Certain Age*, *The Fall* and *Rise of Reginald Perrin* and more).

Of course, there have been outlier series led by older (but not too old) women – *Cougar Town*, *Nurse Jackie*, the brilliant but criminally overlooked

sitcom *Mum* – but these are the exception rather than the rule. Netflix's 2019 film *Wine Country*, about a group of women holidaying in Napa, might have provided a more honest and nuanced depiction of mid-life, given that it was written by Amy Poehler, queen of the subversive, woman-centric comedy. In fact, it featured the protagonists variously getting drunk, self-medicating, passing snarky judgment on one another, all while wallowing in private disappointment and regret. A more mean-spirited portrait of middle-aged womanhood you would struggle to find.

Behind all this is a broader problem about how older women are perceived in the entertainment industry. The myth of women's sell-by date was aptly lampooned in Amy Schumer's comedy sketch *Last Fuckable Day*, where Schumer comes across a picnic where three actors – Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Tina Fey and Patricia Arquette – are celebrating the last days of being "believably fuckable". When Schumer asks when a man's last day is, they all roar



Bridget Christie stars as Linda in 'The Change' on Channel 4

with laughter. "They can be 100 and with nothing but white spiders coming out of them..." Fey says.

Yet there are signs that attitudes might at last be changing. Where *The Change* shrugs off the old clichés of hot flushes and self-hatred around menopause, recent crime dramas such as *Mare of Easttown* and *Happy Valley* gave us, in Kate Winslet and Sarah Lancashire, leading women in their forties and fifties, no-nonsense heroines battling tiredness while challenging the ineptitude and abusiveness of the men in their orbit.

In HBO's *Sex and the City* reboot *And Just Like That...*, the gals about town we knew 20 or so years ago are navigating recalcitrant teenagers, plummeting oestrogen and stagnant marriages. The first series was a mess, with the privileged protagonists putting their foot in it around their non-binary co-stars and worse. But while the second season seems to be as reliably ridiculous as ever, it feels more sure-footed in depicting a group of fiftysomething women leading messy lives and supporting one another through difficult times.

We are still a long way off gender parity among older actors; while men in their fifties and sixties, with their stately greying hair and characterful lines, can still be lotharios and action heroes, their female counterparts (pace Michelle Yeoh in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*) are more likely to be meek, shrewish, embarrassing – or just absent.

Contrary to many popular depictions, middle-aged women are in the prime of their lives. To overlook this demographic is to miss out on its talent, experience and accrued wisdom. The more we see them on screen, not just trying to regain their lost youth but just being, the better for storytelling and TV as a whole.

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