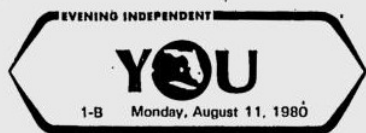


She Survived Years Of Suppression To Dance To Her Heart's Content

HAZEL GEISSLER
Staff Writer



"Once in Toledo, when I was young, I danced in the street.

"I couldn't help it. The music came from the cafe. I was with some girls. And with us were some of the students at the Academie de Toreadors. It was very spontaneous. I couldn't help it. I felt it begin inside. It just happened. I threw back my head and posed my hands and began to beat my heels on the cobblestones."

Ernestina Benayas' sister went home and told their mother and Ernestina was spanked — firmly. Respectable girls like Ernestina did not dance in the streets of Spain!

Ernestina was to become Tina and Benayas would be changed to Tewa.

Tina Tewa has a wonderfully classic Spanish face. Strong, expressive, dramatic. And when she talks, her face reacts expressively. Her hands also react to what she is saying.

It is a difficult decision — to watch her hands or to watch her face. And listen to the Castilian-accented voice at the same time.

She teaches Spanish dance and Middle Eastern dance in a studio. "I thank God I am a dancer."

How did she get from Spain to the Middle East and then the United States? How is it that she teaches the widely different flamenco and what Americans refer to as "belly dancing"?

That's where we begin the story.

"My father was Castilian but somewhere generations before his ancestors were Middle Eastern and so Benayas is an Arabic name. I am trying to trace this ancestry, if it was Lebanon, Morocco, Syria. My mother came from Cordoba."

Tina grew up in Toledo. "I was very tenacious. Always, when I made my mind up, I went after what I wanted until I got it. I was never afraid, I waited. When I fell, I got up and tried to put my foot on more solid ground, to be

stronger."

What were the obstacles?
"My parents were very traditional Spaniards . . . they were strict, Catholic. I found out only last summer that my mother's great-great-grandmother was the Duchess of Bravante. Her family was persecuted in Italy and they migrated to Spain. Here she married into my mother's family.

"I do not tell you this because I feel different. I am what I am. I am a simple person. I am very honest. This strain of nobility was evident in my mother. She lived by the rules, by the etiquette, by manners. I had to live this way, too.

"Besides this, my father was from a wealthy farming family and his father was the mayor of the little town where my father was born."

So five sisters grew up in a closely knit Spanish family where they loved and were loved, but their father was strict and their mother firmly held to the customs and manners of her generation.

"It was difficult. We had not much money. Social class was very important. My mother conducted herself and reared us as upper class but there wasn't enough money to move within this class. The lower class was unthinkable. As for the middle class, we had the money but my mother thought we were above it. But my sisters and I were close to it and really didn't need friends."

Tina says, "I was always floating somewhere in the clouds, always had something special in my mind. I was euphoric even though I was strong. My parents always knew how much I liked to dance, but this was a no-no. A

BIG no-no! In the home, for the family, yes. Anything else was forbidden."

When she was 12, she began attending painting school. This was an approved pastime for a Spanish girl. But her main interest was clothes — designing, sewing. She took designing lessons and sewed for dolls. When she saw a dress in a fashion shop, she went home and sketched it, made it. Her parents began to feel this might be her future. She began working half days in a dress shop and for four years combined her schooling, art school and the sewing.

"I was ambitious. In seven years I became a dress designer. At 21, I wanted to leave Toledo. It was too small for me. My father understood but my mother did not. But she agreed under certain limitations. So I did go to Madrid as I wanted, but I had to live in a convent run by the nuns for working ladies. I had to eat there, sleep there and they locked the gates at 10 p.m. A relative took me to a high couturier fashion shop where I began working half a day. The other half a day I worked for money — to live. My father said my home was always there for me to come back to, but while I was out in the world I had to support myself.

"It was rough but I was stubborn."

As the holiday season approached that year she thought she'd have to quit and go home. There just wasn't enough money. Then a friend suggested she sell dolls to make extra money. "I made clothes and dressed dolls for fun. Thanks be to God for those dolls. People began to know me through the dolls. And at the same time, word was getting around about the clothes I made."

The problem was that a seamstress went to the customers' homes. People who worked in other people's homes were of the servant class in Spain. "In this country, this seems silly. But class is still important in many places in Europe. So it was difficult for me to go into other homes under these circumstances. But I overcame my pride and made myself go because it furthered what I wanted to do."

Soon she was able to move out of the convent living quarters and into a private home owned by two "maiden ladies." She could make her dolls at home, too. And she discovered that those for whom she made clothes treated her not as a servant but as their equal.

Three years later she moved into another private home owned by a woman from Toledo who treated her as a granddaughter and where she could have her customers come to her. During these years, she continued to spend her mornings at the highly fashionable couturier shop as a cutter.

"I wanted to own my own fashion shop, but I hadn't enough money."

And still, the desire to dance remained.

"When I was 23 I met a group of Spanish ballet dancers who were going to Tehran. We talked and they offered me a job with the group as a Spanish dancer. They love flamenco in Iran. The temptation was so great I could not resist. I practiced for about six weeks with the troupe. I had never been out of Spain. I wrote and told my parents where I was going, but I told them I would be working with the costumes. For me it would be an adventure I must try.

"Before I left Spain, I went to confession. I told the priest I would be dancing and he refused absolution, refused communion. I left the church in tears. I could not go in this manner. I returned to the church and went to another priest, one who turned out to have more understanding. He gave me his blessing.

"The tour was to be for a year. It was a difficult year for me because of the difference in the way of life. The entertainment world is not a world of etiquette and refinement. But here I saw oriental dancing for the first time. When I saw this, I felt chills. Always in my dreams I thought of being an exotic dancer and here I was seeing it happen in front of me. I began to try the movements when I was alone. I got some records.

"To me, dance is love. I put my soul in it. I found this Middle Eastern dancing an extension of these feelings. When I was home again, I would show my mother the dance I had learned in Tehran and she would tell me I was made of lizards' tails."

The people she danced with, the people she danced for, were so different from those she had known, and they treated entertainers so rudely that it became more and more difficult for her to continue. "The waitresses called me 'Miss Virgin.'" At the end of 10 months, she returned to Madrid.

But she had managed to save her money and there was enough to open her own fashion shop. "I found a beautiful place. I put out a sign, 'Modes Tina,' and my old clientele returned. Two sisters — one a teacher and the other a sports trainer — came to live with me. We had a cleaning woman and two girls who worked in the shop."

Tina had reached her goal, and was content. But another chapter in her life was about to begin . . .



Tina Tewa's dramatic, expressive facial expressions show the love she has for the art.

She Brought Loves Across The Ocean

Before Tina Benayas went to Iran and after her return, among her friends was an American, Gene Tewa, stationed with an Air Force unit in Toledo. She continued to date him as well as others from time to time.

"Now my shop was well established. I had reached my goal to that point. I hadn't planned to marry. I went to parties where I would dance — with friends — for fun. I was enjoying my life. Gene was teaching me English and I was teaching him Spanish."

One day Tewa came to her shop with a catalog and asked her to choose a ring. He was going back to the United States. But she was so happy with her shop, she told him no.

"But he was so wonderful to me, respectful, kind. He had learned our European manners, really a neat guy. When the time neared for him to leave, I knew I'd miss him. So I said yes and we were married 17 years ago in Toledo."

They came to America, visiting his family in Florida, his sister in Illinois, her sister in Wyoming. His new station was in Wyoming as an electronic technician and they stayed for a year. Tina found herself designing and sewing again that year and made enough money to visit Spain at the end of the year. Tewa was transferred to Michigan next, and their daughter Leann was born there. Tewa was sent to Vietnam for a year and Tina bundled up 6-months-old Leann and went back to Spain for a long visit.

Tewa completed his service after one more year — in Texas. They went to Spain, planning to stay there permanently. "It didn't work out. Gene needed to be in the United States. It is always better to go where the man wants to be, isn't it? I can adjust easily. I always thank God I can do so many things."

They came to Florida and Tewa went to work for the City of St. Petersburg. Tina soon started going to a local health spa to keep her dancing muscles in condition. Seven years ago, the spa offered a "belly dancing" class and she joined in. The more she danced in class, the more she thought about it at home. At last, she began jotting down notes on paper and then contacted some friends.

"I got six of them together and began to teach them — in my home. I already taught myself isolation and muscle control. After I began teaching, I found a book on the subject which told me what I was doing was right. I taught several classes for the next four years but stopped when I went home to Spain at the death of my father."

She began teaching Middle Eastern dancing at another spa, met people, took over a beach studio, and finally, three years ago, found the studio where she is presently located — Benayas Dance Studio, 7118 Central Ave.

About the same time, on another visit to Spain (she visits Spain almost every year and on occasion travels to the Middle East to learn more of the dance there), she received her first formal dance training. She studied flamenco under a well-known dancer, seeking to get basic patterns for teaching it.

"Flamenco, you see, is improvisation. An expression of the soul. You do what your soul tells you to do. Your hands move to the music. The expression of the hands is so much a part of flamenco. So it wasn't easy to find a way to teach it. But I found a dancer/teacher who understood what I wanted and when I returned home I could choreograph the dance. There were would-be students who had been waiting for a year. There were about 10 to start with and four of them are still here. Others replaced those who dropped out."

So the young girl who danced once in the streets of Toledo is still dancing.

"I love Spanish dancing, it is temperamental and happy. And I love Arabic dancing because it is so emotional. They are very different. I wish I was 15 again and knew how to dance and had the freedom to dance that I have now. I am never tired. I move just as my students move. It keeps me in good shape.

"I thank God He made me a dancer!"

— HAZEL GEISSLER



Staff Photos by BARBARA LAING

Once forbidden to dance anywhere but in the privacy of her Spanish home, Tina Tewa now has her own studio.