

A Dance Odyssey: Between Choreography and Performance on the Silk Road

Jose Agudo's dance odyssey began in Andalusia in 1992, not with flamenco as one might expect, but in popular musicals such as *Singing in the Rain* and *West Side Story*. After experiencing a live flamenco performance in his village Pinos Puente, Agudo took formal lessons, immersing himself in the culture and becoming part of the Gitano community in Granada where he studied the *Palos*, the traditional rhythmic patterns, modes or motifs that are used to categorise flamenco's musical forms. Agudo commenced with the *Tango* while performing at the famous caves at Sacromonte, but never satisfied with simply mastering technique, he developed a depth of knowledge in classical Spanish Dance, and in true flamenco tradition based his style on technical rigour and soulful improvisation:

it was about the passion and dedication to the art of flamenco, yes one has to become technically proficient and disciplined, but this is tempered and informed with the spirit of flamenco.¹

The *Spirit of Flamenco* in the broadest sense is a way of life, the attitude, perspective and commitment required to embody the art as lived experience. In the *Guild of Flamenco Artists* the expertise and craftsmanship of the flamenco dancer is synonymous with that of the Artisan; 'every good craftsman conducts a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking, this dialogue evolves into sustaining habits, and these habits establish a *rhythm...*'². Good habits become customs, customs refined and repeated become the ritual fabric of cultures, and in rhythms and cycles of time they evolve into thousands of histories. The antecedents of flamenco rhythms are debatable in terms historical evidence, for example, 'the Andalusian cadence based on the Phrygian mode, the most compatible of all with the distress and anxiety of flamenco is said to derive from the Byzantine liturgy, preserved by the Mozarabic church in Córdoba until the 13th Century'³, or possibly the 'Roma migration from Rajasthan between the 9th and 14th Centuries whose rich culture of song and dance interweaved with that of the Sephardic Jews and Moors in Southern Spain'.⁴ There are as many theories of flamenco origins as there are forms in the *Palos* which may be problematic for music historians, but for choreographers like Agudo it signals an opportunity, his work defined *in* the dance and according to *how* it is done, a flamenco *approach* with natural connections to contemporary methods as a 'form that continually evolves and transforms itself.'⁵

Agudo's approach develops the subtle craft of 'drawing things together, exploring movement through an exchange of forms, traditions, rituals, religions, ideas and energies'⁶ in the evolving space of contemporary dance. As both choreographer and performer he works with precision and focus on movement material like an Artisan at the cutting edge, or what Richard Sennett called the 'active edge'⁷, where forms come to life at the border, take shape and are rendered visible at the very threshold of what is technically possible. Flamenco is a continual source of inspiration in his creative process in terms of its embodiment of contemporary techniques, historical connection to forms of Kathak dance, and affinity with traditions in martial arts and Eastern spirituality. Agudo's choreography in this sense becomes the deeply meaningful experience of mastering the expression of skill and dexterity in bodily intelligence, garnered from thousands of hours of *practice*. In terms

of energy and commitment to his work, Agudo 'leaves everything on the floor'⁸ with regard to the intensity of his studio practice, and the visceral connection made with the audience during a performance. This level of dedication, the *desire* to 'make a gift of the work'⁹, resonates across the oeuvre and reflects Agudo's long-standing interest in Eastern Spirituality and the practice of mindfulness. In choreographic terms it translates into the perception of the dynamic between movement and stillness, a heightened awareness of one's being in the rhythm and flow of life whereby Agudo's skill in knowing when to pause, break and punctuate a piece, to 'manage the flow of a performance',¹⁰ conveys to the audience a deeper understanding of stillness-movement, where one is contained within the other. As Bruce Lee observed, 'only when there is stillness in movement does the universal rhythm manifest'. We are *moved* by Agudo's dance because it goes beyond the frame of convention and explores the capacity to convey - 'to transport or carry to a place'- as we partake in his journey of self-discovery, spiritual awakening and engagement with the vital force of movement itself. But what is the visceral nature of this place, and how is it brought to life in the rhythmic flow of experience?

The answer is encountered in the *Silk Road* (2017), a tour de force that draws upon Agudo's dance heritage and dynamic range of expertise to navigate a unique path between choreography and performance, across traditional and contemporary forms. To fully appreciate the richness and depth of this piece as Agudo's 'auto-biographical journey into dance',¹¹ we must first retrace the steps of earlier works - *Ki* (2013), *A Thousand Shepherds* (2013) and *Paradiso* (2017) - which unfold within the historical context of the silk routes, a refrain on the nomadic souls; monks, merchants, warriors, artisans, and scholars who sought adventure and enlightenment from Xinjiang in China to the Iberian Peninsula. These works are underscored by the mythical layers already woven into the historical silk routes, whose complex 'pathways serve as the world's central nervous system, connecting peoples and places together'¹² across ancient and modern cycles of time. If we consider myths to be 'the great storage and retrieval systems for cultural information'¹³ the style and substance of Agudo's works are imbued with the ancestral memory of thousands of inter-connected journeys that converge on the Great Cities of the World, a cultural dance between East and West, ebbs and flows of trade, paths to Enlightenment, channels of wisdom and knowledge, and the rise and fall of Civilisations.

The Mongols built one such civilisation on the silk routes to connect Northern China to Eastern Europe, the largest land empire in history its foundations laid by Genghis Khan and his nomadic armies between 1206 - 1227. His birth name Temujin translates as 'man of iron' or 'blacksmith', and through the evolution of boy into fighting spirit, *Ki* (2013), commissioned by Phoenix Dance Theatre, explores the dynamic contest of inner strength versus outer adversity in the transformation of Temujin - who suffered poverty and tragedy in childhood - into the all-conquering warrior and legend of Genghis Khan. Vincenzo Lamagna's ethereal, mantra-like score builds a relentless rhythm like a march across time and continents, transporting us to the panoramic views of the Mongolian Steppes as the dancer's physical presence unfolds into Genghis Khan's mighty character, surveying both the imaginary plain of vast Mongolian wilderness and the real breadth of the stage.

The epic story moves through the uncertain frame of Temujin, at first vulnerable then gradually discovering his strength and gymnastic prowess with a growing sense of authority,

the iron spirit of the boy now tempered and war ready in the awesome, unearthly power of the legendary warrior. The compact narrative reminds us of a similar mythical structure in the dynamic storyboards of the comic book, where in the turn of a few pages we see the main protagonist undergo a radical change, often from a young orphan, isolated, clumsy and introverted into a larger than life superhero with super-human powers. The famous interjection *Pow!* delivers the full emotive force of the action, which jumps off the page and literally *makes an impression* on the reader. In *Ki*, Agudo's choreography has a similar effect, he asks us to be complicit in *The Adventures of Genghis Khan* with an active imagination, to wonder what it feels like to exceed our perceived limits, to marshal our energies and move beyond ourselves in the enduring journey of life.

As we continue this journey in a north-westerly direction along the historical silk roads we reach the city gates of Florence, the birth place of Dante Alighieri c.1265. The third movement in Dante's narrative poem the *Divine Comedy* provides the inspiration for Agudo's *Paradiso: Man's Enduring Search for Perfection* (2017), a commissioned production for Akademi. In *The Spirit of Romance* (1910) Ezra Pound considers the timeless appeal of Dante; 'there are works of art which are beautiful objects and works of art which are keys or passwords admitting one to a deeper knowledge, to a finer perception of beauty; Dante's work is of the second sort.'¹⁴ Agudo's beautifully composed phrases are a dance with Dante through the spheres of heaven in a contemporary rendition of Kathak, infused with the 'deeper knowledge' of Vedic creation myths in which the Universe vibrates itself into being. In the concluding moment of *Paradiso*, Dante sees in a flash of Enlightenment that truth is beyond all space and time:

*But already my desire and my will
were being turned like a wheel, all at one speed
by the Love, which moves the Sun and the other stars*¹⁵

The verse echoes the karmic wheel of life where love and compassion are the keys to the Way beyond suffering, the soul's place in Dante's cosmos a sign of its condition as today one might feel 'under the weather', 'on cloud nine' or 'on top of the world'. Agudo builds an ambient connection with the audience by transforming Dante's states of being into beautiful variations of feeling, a timely reminder that 'we can share a cultural knowledge and understanding of things but without emotion it's neither authentic nor sincere'.¹⁶ Agudo's narrative pivots between the pilgrim's vision of Paradise and the karmic fields of the Upanishads as a journey into the modern condition of the soul looking skyward, searching for perfection. The very idea of raising our spiritual awareness is alive in the sun-kissed rooftop perspective at London's South Bank, the early evening shadows drawing a mystical pattern of chiaroscuro on the encircled dance floor. As sunset approaches the dancers flow between asymmetry and synchrony as if struggling to find a virtuous alignment of stars and planets, their centrifugal forces dispersed in Kathak spins and balletic poise. Waves of slow-motion break the momentum at intervals as the heavens 'wind-down' in profound moments of stillness, only to re-animate for one last refrain where the dancers reach beyond all time and motion, and like Dante are bestowed with a unique sense of the moving spirit their cadence as 'celestial bodies' now literally a sign of poetry in motion.

In *A Thousand Shepherds* (2013), commissioned by ACE Dance and Music, the spiritual journey retains a greater sense of gravity as Agudo continues to explore the theme of

pilgrimage, moving between the warp and weft of sacred and emotionally charged states to weave a beautiful texture of ritual narrative. The multitude of cultural influences for the piece include Shinto and Buddhist beliefs, the complex Spanish folk dance of *Jota Aragonesa*, the film adaptation of Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose*, Jerzy Grotowski's theatrical method, Federico Garcia Lorca's play *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Enrique Morente's Flamenco song *1000 Pastores*, and *Christ's Departure In Holy Week (Semana Santa)* in the procession of the fraternity of gypsies in Granada. Agudo derives his choreography from the distilled essence of these characters, stories, songs and places, the archetypes that emerge in the mythical substance of his source materials. 'The Nomad' 'The Shepherd', 'The Apprentice', 'The Master', 'The Warrior', 'The Monk', 'The Artisan', 'The Pilgrim' are forms animated in the rhythmic life of the dance; 'it is only through practice and technical proficiency that I have developed an intuition and know-how for drawing out the vital elements of the story, and mapping them onto the core elements of the movement language'.¹⁷ Agudo transforms the narrative threads of the story into a coherent *moving image* by exploring a pared-down, efficient and highly adaptable index of rhythmic gestures, their core elements allowing him to stream a diverse range of source material into the exchange between choreographer and dancers, who bring their own stories, feelings and perspectives to the composition.

In its development *A Thousand Shepherds* moves into the ascetic life of the Zen Buddhist's daily routine, which through repetition evolves into meaningful ritual and spiritual discipline. We are reminded of the contract of devotion at the heart of martial arts practice in the story of Bodhidharma, who on arrival at the Shaolin Temple found his Chinese disciples too weak, both physically and mentally to practice the intensive meditation required by his path to enlightenment.¹⁸ As a method for cultivating strength, flexibility and balance on the strenuous path toward Enlightenment, Bodhidharma developed the Shaolin Kung Fu *forms* and transferred them onto the bodies of his disciples. Agudo taps into this tradition when he embodies the ritual meaning of his dance during the development phase, a means of organising the unruly nature of physical energy into the rhythmic force of the *narrative form*, alive in the exchange between dance, storytelling and poetics. As good shepherd and choreographer, he plays a pastoral role in looking after his dancers while demanding the same level of commitment from them, not least in terms of strength and conditioning; 'there is hard work and dedication required to learn the piece inside out, to fix the movements and recreate the emotion again and again with technique'.¹⁹ In the true spirit of contemporary dance Agudo encourages a demanding but open-source approach to creativity, where the work 'finds its feet' in the rigorous testing of new patterns, flows and variations.

The opening sequence of *A Thousand Shepherds* reprises the heart-felt discipline of studio practice as we encounter the dancers living a monastic life, engaged in cleansing rituals which re-charge their spirits and sharpen their energies for the challenging journey ahead. The intrinsic rules of Kathak and Flamenco, Konnakols as *Tatkar* and *Mudras*, and the less structured *Palos* work as energy efficient forms of storytelling, allowing for a complex relay of rhythmical exchanges between choreography, music, audience and dancers their designated guide, 'Yukiko', the moving spirit of Agudo's purpose and intention. Against the background of an emotionally charged atmosphere that envelops both audience and dancers the shepherds' journey is revealed in stages as one of faith and endurance,

punctuated by moments of doubt and uncertainty. Yukiko becomes a 'strange attractor' in the emotional field, helping to orientate both the intention and purpose of the flock, its fluidity, grace and power becoming more expansive in sweeping, salutatory gestures as the tempo rises. An elegant holding-pattern of union and dispersal soars between each plateau of the shepherd's journey, like a murmuration of starlings in the evening sky. Almost without realising we are drawn into this palpable field of emotion, entranced by the momentum of the spiritual journey, and in this field of humility and endeavour, *A Thousand Shepherds* tend to their work and present it as a gift to the audience.

We have approached the *Silk Road* (2018) by way of *Ki*, *Paradiso* and *A Thousand Shepherds*, which demonstrate Agudo's emotional register, capacity for innovation, versatility and range; his unique, multi-layered choreography following the spirit of his flamenco roots, evolving with the emotional timbre of each new commission. Agudo brings traditional forms of dance into a contemporary context but retains their integrity as rules-based genres, historically constituted and transferred between generations, in much the same way as the artisan hands down his craft in a 'body of knowledge' to his apprentice. In this respect, Agudo developed his ability in Kathak dance under the expert tutelage of Akram Khan, training with him for six years and working as choreographic assistant and rehearsal director with Akram Khan Company. In continuing this exchange of cultures and expertise, the *Silk Road* navigates a route between classical forms of Spanish and Indian dance, displayed in the original duet with Bharatanatyam master Mavin Khoo as an *arrangement* that respects their essential character; 'it's not a fusion of Flamenco and Kathak, we play with rules and conventions, explore connections and experiment with their composition in a contemporary context'.²⁰

The *Silk Road* connects history with tradition in this spirit of exchange and makes something new within contemporary dance. In the brooding introduction Agudo appears as an apparition retracing his flamenco roots, just visible and bare-chested, a ghostly figure in Rafael Amargo's Flamenco lament, summoned to the stage by the sombre guitar tones. The melodic phrase arcs into a crescendo, breaks and repeats, Agudo by degrees being 'tuned in' by the music his character becoming solid as he literally stamps his authority on the piece with pneumatic precision, as if the force and momentum could literally 'break the floor'.²¹ Assured and impressive like the original Matadors his contours have a statuesque quality, heightened by the near silence and subdued lighting, as our attention is drawn to the sheer physicality of the body and its work on the floor. Agudo draws into his being all that is essential in the *Palos* toward a 'vanishing point' beyond meaning but not *sense*. Striving to find what is most real he works like the abstract painter to extract the true spirit of Flamenco Dance as we are left with a *desire* for more; longing to return to that place again and again to see what we might discover there within ourselves.

In the space between Flamenco and Kathak is a musical interlude. The musicians Bernhard Schimpelsberger and Giuliano Modarelli are conversing in flamenco guitar, Indian konnakols and percussion, reprising the introduction and developing the soundscape. The shuffle of patterns, phrases and refrains initially evoke an Arabic influence, a journey of imagination from the Alhambra across the Mediterranean to the Mughal Empire in North India. The interplay of 'rhythm discovery' opens the floor to a unique contemporary dance between West and East, which explores the potential of the Kathak-Flamenco connection:

the meters and foot rhythms used in kathak are more varied and complex than those in flamenco, they nonetheless have many rhythmic patterns in common, utilize similar footwork techniques in articulating those patterns, and they share the 3/4, 4/4, and 12/8 time signatures.²²

In the true spirit of performance these variations become the soul-technologies of dance, Flamenco finds our fault lines and breaks them open, Kathak looks for flaws and tries to perfect them.

Moving along this rhythmic terrain we now pivot from Andalusia to North India in the *Silk Road's* Kathak solo, choreographed by Nahid Siddiqui. With swan-like grace and poise Agudo appears out of the void, gunghroo bells shimmering into the light of dawn, a blade of light throws into relief a mudra of Lord Krishna's crown that hinges from right to left, synonymous with 'the flamenco arm position for the raised horns of a bull',²³ and in this subtle shift of registers we are expertly 'tuned in' by the sitar to a common frequency between the different traditions. As the dance proceeds into daybreak the sun fills the rectangular plane of the dancefloor that vibrates with energy like a Mark Rothko colour-field painting, up-lifting the dancer who this time is not breaking but 'becoming one with the floor',²⁴ merging with a plane of diffuse energy its flow channelled by the tatkars, feet caressing the floor like the rhythmic hand of the artisan baker kneading dough. With an up-lift in the percussive pitch and tempo we become aware of the performer as dancer *and* musician, a rhythm coheres, breaks and subtly syncopates in the elegant interplay of drum, bells and guitar, sometimes bending but never breaking the rules; 'an exchange of energies happens when everybody knows the system, we cultivate a small phrase or melody, adapt it to the creative environment and see it flower into a wider ecology of rhythm.'²⁵ In celebration of this creative vitality Agudo covers every inch of the dance floor, acknowledging the spiritual bond between the ground and the soles of feet, as the closing phase of the Kathak solo echoes the supra-natural motifs of *Paradiso* in the oblique circle of soft light, at once symbolic of the moon and the luminosity of Lord Krishna's lotus flower. The heavenly rays highlight the dancer's feet and gunghroo bells as the music accelerates in tempo and pitch, our kathak dancer now squeezed into nowhere, shimmers back out of existence into the virtual space of the void.

In the final movement we could be back at a Buddhist monastery on the silk routes by way of *Ki*, Genghis Khan and the Mongolian Steppes, drinking tea with two of *A Thousand Shepherds* having strayed east from the flock into Northern China. The 2019 version of the duet with Kenny Wing Tao Ho marks the culmination of the *Silk Road* to date as events move full circle from China back towards Andalusia; 'its tone and character influenced by *The Travels of Marco Polo*, and in particular the kingdom of Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis, and ruler of the first Han Dynasty'.²⁶ Marco Polo's portrait of Kublai Khan's grand summer palace in Xanadu had a lasting impact on English Romanticism's ideal of the exotic, faraway place with an enchanted, spiritualised Nature. And nowhere was this more pronounced than in Coleridge's *Kubla Khan: or a Vision in a Dream*, which explores the workings of poetry itself - water a motif for the imagination - as virtual and real events intermingle in a nebulous terrain on the fringes of reality:

*Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!*²⁷

The poem's rhythmic power has the capacity to summon a world in an instant and carry us away on waves of wonder and enchantment. Agudo's choreography has the same affect, its mobility of feeling infused with Romantic sensibility, the dramaturgy and emotional range in keeping with the *Wanderlust* of the great narrative poems. The duet unfolds into this enchanted air of expectation as the prospect of a journey into the West beckons, conveyed in daily rituals of packing, weaving, dining, sharpening, sewing and preparing for combat in manoeuvres that recall the Shaolin sword forms, perhaps in anticipation of 'Ancestral voices prophesying war!'. As they continue on their journey west we sense the fate of our two pilgrims is woven together in a common purpose, their reciprocal nature like the symmetry of body and soul, earth and sky, the dance between yin and yang. A strange alchemy exists between the dancers who combine with molecular ease into a form recalling that of Nataraja, the depiction of Shiva as the cosmic dancer, as first one then the other flickers in and out existence as if testing the earthly limits of an invisible field of energy, animated by a Rhythm that informs everything, and the Dance that performs its will.

Stillness: Agudo is now accompanied by the mysterious sage on the journey back towards the Alhambra in the Emirate of Granada, or perhaps the semi-mythical harbour City of Tartessos, where some locate the elusive origins of flamenco? With poetic licence time shuffles, histories become entangled and uncertainty prevails as life's eternal condition; the very act of returning home after a long journey should be cause for celebration but can be fraught with danger as Odysseus discovered. And so it goes with the *Silk Road*, tragedy strikes and our sage from the East – in sacrifice, despair or valour we cannot be sure - falls to the ground and drifts toward death. There are echoes of the Grail Quest and the wounded Fisher King, the journey an allegory of spiritual endeavour where parts of ourselves die and are reborn in a process of self-discovery:

recognising this multiplicity in oneself, you realise that the "Other" (being the other performer, the new culture you discover, or the audience even), is often buried somewhere inside you [...] It's a never-ending search for inter-connectedness, for common roots'.²⁸

The *Silk Road* explores a common root between forms of flamenco and Kathak through the alterity of self-Other, a creative currency in dance, expressed in 'the dynamism of the beautiful and its capacity to provoke thought',²⁹ here the thought that although adventure is exciting and sometimes heroic we need not visit strange and faraway places to experience the exotic, it is a place already within ourselves as something we might become... And in the somatic becoming of rhythm and ritual, the *Silk Road* weaves its way into the audience's heart:

the body produces a garland of rhythms, one could say a bouquet, though these words suggest an aesthetic *arrangement*, as if the artist Nature had foreseen beauty – the harmony of the body (of bodies) – that results from all its history'³⁰

In the *Silk Road, A Thousand Shepherds, Paradiso and Ki*, Agudo bestows this 'garland of rhythms' in the 'to and fro' of accepting and resisting, departing and returning, connecting and letting go; rhythms nested within each other, organised to carry stories, characters, and worlds in motion. The only limitation on these worlds is where to draw the boundary at the active edge of 'the contemporary', how to craft, control and release our rhythms into the frequency and flow of performance, so that life in all its mystery can move within us if only we choose to get up and dance.

© Jonathan Willett 2019

End Notes

1. Jose Agudo, unpublished *Notes on Contemporary Choreography* (2019), 1.
2. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin, 2008), 9.
3. Barbara Thompson, "Flamenco: A Tradition in Evolution" in *The World of Music*, Vol.27, No. 3 (1985), 68 – 69
4. Ronald Lee, *Roma and Flamenco: Myth and Reality* (2003) accessed online at Kopachi.com, 24/8/2019.
5. Jose Agudo, unpublished *Notes on Contemporary Choreography* (2019), 2
6. *Ibid.*, 1.
7. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin, 2008), 227
8. Jose Agudo, unpublished *Notes on Contemporary Choreography* (2019), 1
9. *Ibid.*, 3.
10. *Ibid.*, 2.
11. *Ibid.*, 1.
12. Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), xvi.
13. Joann W. Kealiinohomoku, "Dance, Myth and Ritual in Time and Space" in *Dance Research Journal*, Vol.29, No.1 (Spring, 1997), 70.
14. Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1910), 178.
15. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, Canto XXXVIII, lines 142-145, C.H. Sisson trans. (OUP, 2008).
16. Jose Agudo, unpublished *Notes on Contemporary Choreography* (2019), 3.
17. *Ibid.*, 2.
18. British Kung Fu Association, *Kung Fu-Origins* (2017), accessed online at laugar-kungfu.com, 14/8/2019.
19. Jose Agudo, unpublished *Notes on Contemporary Choreography* (2019), 4.
20. *Ibid.*, 3.
21. Miriam Phillips, "Becoming the Floor/Breaking the Floor, Experiencing the Kathak-Flamenco Connection" in *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Fall 2013), 410.
22. *Ibid.*, 400.
23. *Ibid.*, 406.
24. *Ibid.*, 420.
25. Jose Agudo, unpublished *Notes on Contemporary Choreography* (2019), 4.
26. *Ibid.*, 3.
27. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Kubla Khan: Or a vision in a dream*. (1816), accessed online at Wikipedia, 19/9/19.
28. Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui in Lise Uytterhoeven "A Cosmopolite's Utopia: Limitations to the Generational Flemish Dance History Model", *Platform* 4.2 (2009), 10.
29. Melissa McMahon, "Machinic Repetition in the Age of Art" in *A Shock to Thought: Expression After Deleuze and Guattari*, Brian Massumi ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 7
30. Henry Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (London: Continuum, 2004), 20