EL YIYO . THE GREATEST GIPSY DANCER

"El Yiyo", a flamenco dancer whose real name is Miguel Fernandez, honed his skills by watching YouTube videos. Now, aged just 24, he made his debut at Spain's main opera house with a show he developed during the country's virus lockdown.



Photos by Pierre-Philippe Marcou.

Spain's new flamenco prodigy was born into a Roma family in Badalona, near Barcelona, who are from the southwestern region of Andalusia, the birthplace of the art form which incorporates poetry, singing, guitar playing, dance and rhythmic hand-clapping and foot-stomping.

“El Yiyo” recalls catching the attention of flamenco dancer Manuel Jimenez, alias “Bartolo”, as a child while dancing at a family wedding.

“He told my parents that he wanted to give me free lessons, because I was a diamond he wanted to polish,” he told AFP at Madrid's Teatro Real before his debut performance there on Friday night.

“In our family, we celebrated good news by singing. Children sang and danced, it was very normal for them, a reflex that I absorbed at a very young age without being aware of it.”

He was just seven when he first began performing for the public at a hall in Barcelona.

At the age of 11 he was already the headline act during a tour of Taiwan.

And before Spain went into a nationwide lockdown because of the pandemic in March, he danced for four months at the legendary Corral de la Moreria flamenco venue in Madrid.

'Dance of strength'



In rehearsals at the Teatro Real in Madrid

“El Yiyo”, who has modelled clothes for Armani and IKKS and even featured in Vogue, used the lockdown to choreograph the show which he performed at the Teatro Real. Also in 2022 was in Dior´s Presentantion in Seville.

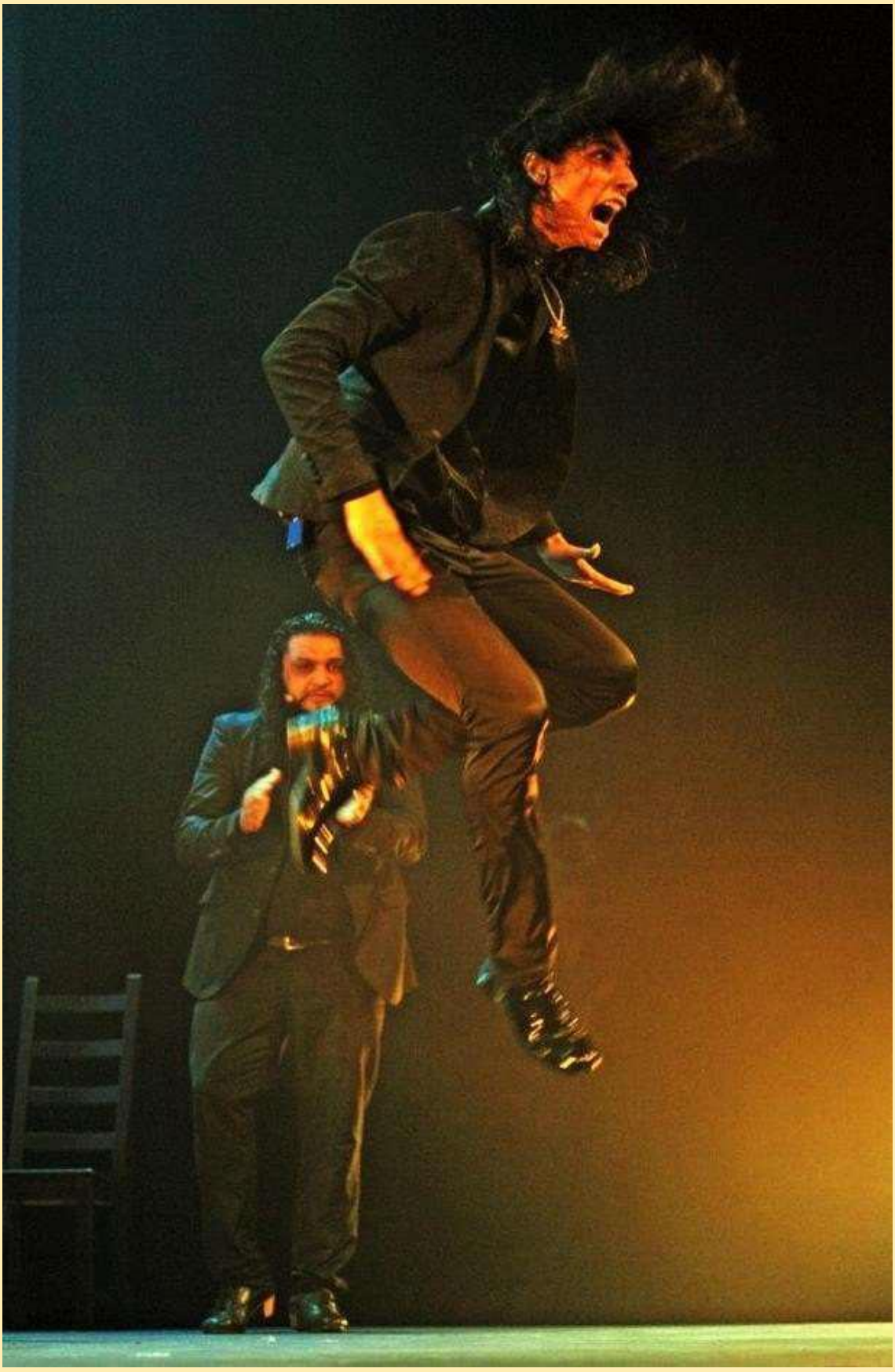
He appeared on the stage alongside his brother Ricardo in a performance that displayed his ability to improvise.

While he was performing a “zapateado”, which is marked by a rapid rhythmic stomping of the floor, one of his heels broke.

“El Yiyo” swiftly took off his shoes and continued the performance in his socks to the applause of the audience.

“My dance is a state of mind,” he said, before adding it is “a dance of strength, of intensity”.





While he was happy to be invited to perform at the two-centuries-old Teatro Real, he said there was still “a lot of ground to cover” before flamenco has the “weight” it deserves in august institutions such as the Madrid opera house.

Slender and with shoulder-length hair, “El Yiyo” — a diminutive form of Miguelillo (little Miguel) — said he gets his inspiration from the great names of flamenco.

“I try to learn something from all of them,” he said.

Eclectic education

“El Yiyo” said he bolstered his formal dance training by watching YouTube performances of legendary flamenco stars who have passed away, such as Antonio Gades who he admires for his “elegance” and Carmen Amaya who performed in several Hollywood films at the peak of her career in the 1940s and who he called a “genius”.

The contemporaries he admires are Antonio Canales and Joaquin Cortes, who fuses various styles with flamenco, and “Farruquito”, hailed by critics for his entrancing, rapid foot-tapping turns who he is proud to have danced with.

While “El Yiyo” is more of a flamenco purist, he said he sees nothing wrong with fusing it with other genres like the blues, jazz or rock, a trend that has become more popular following the success of Grammy-winning Spanish singer Rosalia who mixes flamenco with reggaeton, trap and R&B.

Rosalia, who is not Roma, has been accused by some of appropriating an art form with Roma origins.

“I am in favour of variety, that way there is a wide range of purists, of non-purists, and that way flamenco is always talked about,” said “El Yiyo”

EL YIYO BOOKING

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