

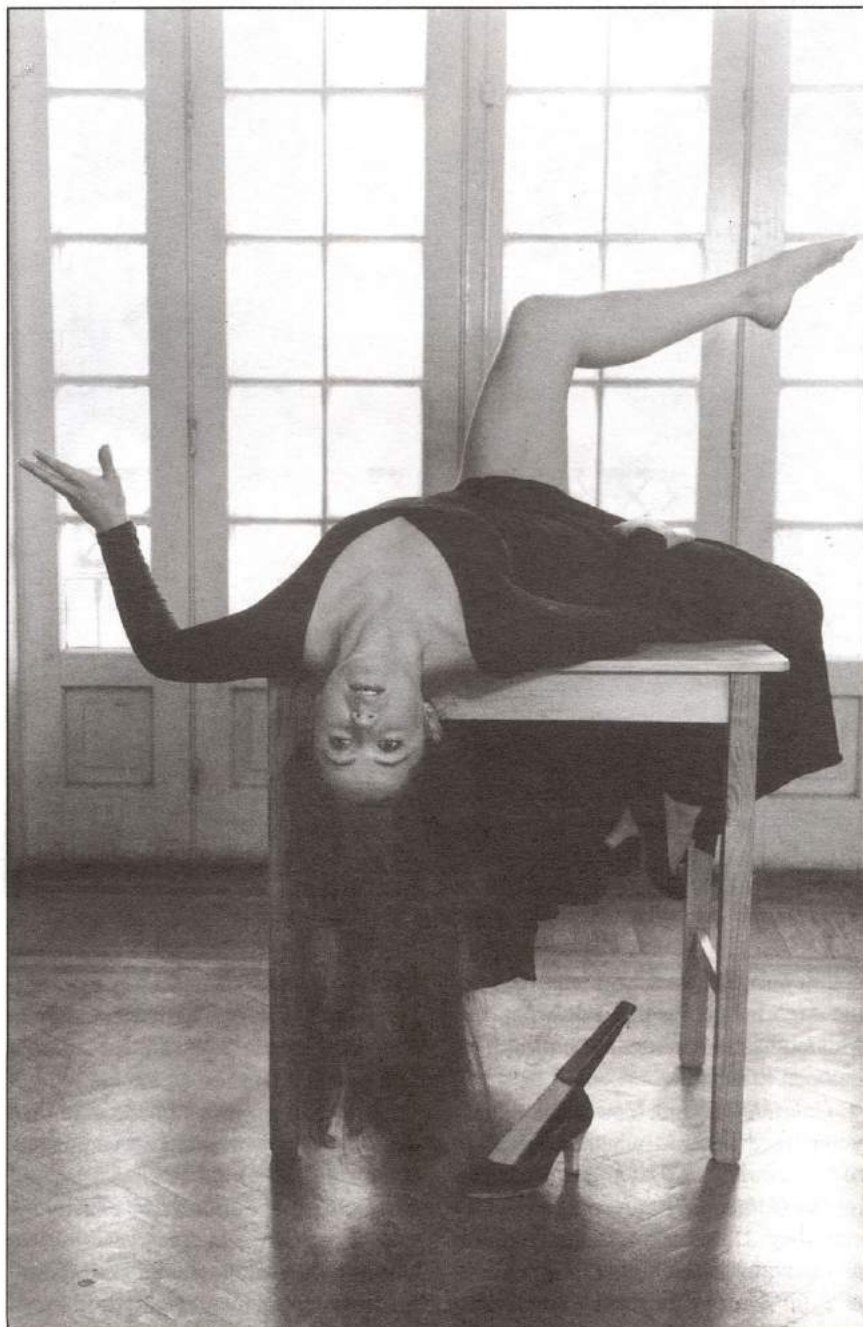
Pilar Medina and the ear of corn

The studio is warm and the walls are covered with mirrors which multiply the image of Pilar Medina. A serene face which is frequently lit up by a smile. A grave, thoughtful, flowing voice....

“Our system is put together in such a way that the individual lacks that great possibility of exposing his or her body in an unusual, unrepeatable and almost fleeting act—the spectacle of dance. For the spectator, the only way of holding on to the performance is through memory and the ability to learn so as to keep it inside his veins. As a spectacle, dance has a great fragility; paradoxically, this is what gives it enormous power. It’s not a canvas or a book which can always keep us company: it’s part of your memory, with all that implies.

“Sometimes, when watching my performances, the audience starts asking itself whether this dance—which is not folk dance—is Mexican, and while they ponder this they miss half the performance. In Mexico, any kind of artistic manifestation belongs to us. If it’s Spanish dance combined with classical dance, if you use techniques from India, if you use your voice in a particular way, if you make a surrealist statement or do something traditionally Mexican, in any case it is an expression of Mexico.

“All the colors are inside of us. We have all the fruits, the sun, rain, cold, heat, light.... It’s not easy being an artist if you’re Mexican, because many hours of your life must be given over to all sorts of influences which are constantly transforming your being. When you go to another



I like to work with people who let things flow.



Elsa Escamilla

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country and they ask you what you do, the answer I give is that I do what Mexico has taught me: to be plural, to be open to stimuli."

● **Gabriela Rábago:** You once said that your dance pieces—whether *Wedding of Sorrow*, *Hymn*, *The Mass Inside You* or *The Golden Eagle*—cannot be classified. Does this mean that you are an innovator in the field of dance?

■ **Pilar Medina:** It means there is a tendency to classify the technique with which you live or in which you are

trained. So when I began to mix the techniques of classical dance and flamenco, and added what I'd learned in a course that showed me the theatrical possibilities I had... and on top of all this I invented movements, the result was a kind of mixture which I myself could not describe exactly—and of course the audience and the critics didn't know what it was about either. People have recently told me: "Following you is following the dance which you work out, which is an

individual being, something original which belongs to Pilar Medina." I think my work has gone beyond the stage of classifications. Now when an artistic or creative expression can't be pigeon-holed, that causes anxiety, it produces a very particular kind of nervousness. So people either tend to minimize the supposed quality of the performance, or they feel attracted by it. I know that orthodox audiences don't like my work. But others enjoy the syncretism of what I've created. It seems to me that in art we have to learn to mix the different elements that life sets before us.

A moment came in my life when I decided I was definitely not going to cultivate Spanish dance. But what was I going to do, given that my body had already assimilated that technique? The alternative was to feed it with something else, and I began to feed myself with classical dance, Graham's modern dance, theater.... Also, since I was a child I've been intrigued by canvases, and that could be applied to costumes. I write what I dance. It was very easy for me to begin to feel that this is the milieu I liked to move in, even if it was very far from what I learned as a dance student.

● **GR:** Who are the members of your group and to what degree do they participate? Is Pilar Medina a dancer-orchestra?

■ **PM:** When the choreography is in its initial stages I am virtually alone. I don't discuss the project—so I won't tell you what I'm working on now; I don't mention it or open it up. But I try to see where the impulse came from. When I did *The Golden Eagle*, the eagle took me over. I felt that I had to spring towards the sky, that I had to work out organically how to go up without ceasing to be on the ground, and that perhaps I was responding to part of what I observed in my reality, my world, my time, the contemporary life that surrounds me, and I thought it was necessary to talk about these subjects—to dance them.

I was anxious to know why I was beginning to make air movements, movements of elevation, the result of which would obviously be freedom. When I did them I hurt my shoulders a lot, but I kept on going and going. Later I started to find the music and then I started to write how it was all coming out. I observed the Sun and the Moon.... In short I looked for the nature which an eagle could look for, and later I realized that when our ancestors found the legendary eagle, they founded a city, and I interpreted this with the desire to found my own interior city.

In the course of all these experiences and reflections, in Zacatecas I met somebody who takes care of eagles. He showed me the eagles in the mountains and, among other things, how they fly. On this basis I continued to work on my idea in the studio.

Once I have the idea clear, I talk it over with my music arranger, Luis Lavalle—a wonderful person—and I ask him for the sounds I need. He never asks me why or what for. I like to work with people who don't have prejudices about my work and who let things flow. Then, working together, we find out whether or not the thing has unity, and that's really beautiful. People who don't let that choreographic motivation flow do not enrich the work. I always tell the people who are close to me that they are working not with Pilar Medina but with the work I'm creating, which needs all of us.

Along with the music I think about the costumes, and in thinking about the costumes I think about the lighting. I can't buy green cloth if I know there's going to be a red light above; it will come out purple. At this point a territorial phenomenon begins to show itself. Right now I'm working with two extraordinary technicians. They listen to my ideas on how the lighting will be, and tell me if it's achievable in terms of structure.



Along with the music I think about the costumes and lighting.

Throughout my career I've made mistakes, I've worked with people who haven't been right—who maybe did not respect, or were lacking in, the mystique of the theater. Or perhaps I worked with egos and not persons. Many times there are individuals who want to work with me but try to get me to follow their design rather than that of the work itself. So I can't dance the costume design of So-and-so or tap-dance on the scenery that Such-and-such liked. To a certain degree I

am a woman-orchestra, but that doesn't cause me problems. I have gotten used to directing certain vectors that lead to the same objective. I adore the musical part, I can't stand the administrative part, I still don't know how to sew a cloth. Some things are easier for me than others; but yes, I'm involved in all of it.

● *GR*: What happens after a performance debuts?

■ *PM*: Then there is what's called the operational part of the work. During

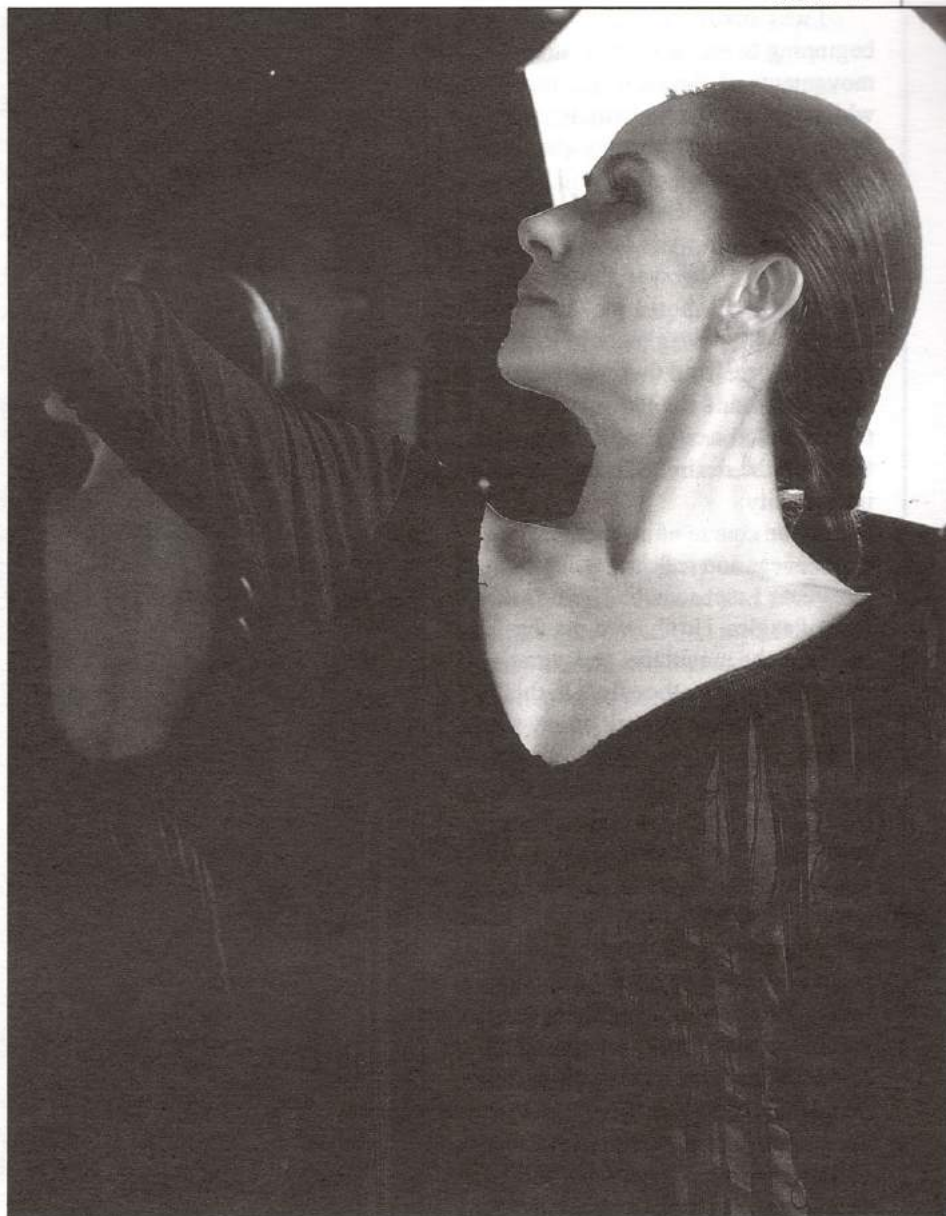
performances, the show must continue to grow, or else it stagnates. It doesn't always grow with you. So the team involved in the performances has to be very good at helping the work keep protecting itself. For me, this means that I have to be very sure of the work before I go out and seek help in producing it or keeping it going.

It took me a long time to understand that the most important thing is the dance in itself. What I mean is that if at a certain point there's no lighting, that doesn't matter. That if the floor is not in good condition, it won't change the result. That if the performance is in the morning rather than at night, that's immaterial. The essential thing is to give enough power to the dance part, to the body, to the organic projection that the dance can have—and if I also have the technical back-up, that's great. In another sense, although I work as a soloist, behind me there are always people working so I can go out on the stage with more energy. When I don't have a solid team I'm insecure when I go out.

● *GR*: Is the work more important than Pilar Medina?

■ *PM*: Both have been equally important. Long ago I accepted that I was not only a dancer but an artist. For my generation it was hard to say the word "artist," and for me it was somewhat taboo. But when I accepted it I realized that my life and being a woman corresponded to the works I was doing; that the works gave me feedback to keep going. And one performance led me to the next.

Wedding of Sorrow would not have come into existence if I hadn't had such passionate and wonderful teachers, who taught me Spanish dance. *Hymn* would not have existed without the primitive cry that was *Wedding of Sorrow*, because *Hymn* was already a more intellectual structure, a more methodological work when it came to the creation of choreography. And in turn, *Hymn*



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could only give way to *Immediate Delivery*. *The Mass Inside You* obviously had to do with a moment in which I was imploring, praying, asking for a code of ideas, of emotions and instants of woman in relation to the world. At that point, I had to understand what spirituality is, what it means to reach a supreme being, what it is to stand side by side with your own guilts, what it is to make things clean, and after that cleaning, to find the void.

● *GR*: How important is it to you whether the spectators do or don't understand your presentation? Would you dance in an empty theater, only for Pilar Medina?

■ *PM*: The audience is the complement of my work. I do the first part because it is absolutely indispensable for me: if I don't dance I wither. But, so as not to be in a closed circuit, the most convincing part is when I take the dance out to the public and give it to them. I have

struggled a lot—and suffered, if one can speak that way—when I've put forward a dance which was not just about a divertimento or the aesthetics of the body, because my performances require that the audience work with me and that there be a combination of energies between them and me. Obviously not all of the audience is ready for that, and not everybody is willing to do it. I used to feel responsible for opening a path. Now I feel that when someone comes to a dance performance, they're wondering whether they'll see a divertimento or something which will put them to work on other areas of their brain and their sensibility.

I am against trying to understand everything that happens on the stage. Some artists don't give you the option of feeling and not understanding. I do, but I like working with the audience. If four or five spectators are following me, if they perceive and open their pores to my work, that's enough for me. I feel profoundly light, content and untired, when this unity is achieved at my performances.

● *GR*: Has working "alone" been beneficial or harmful to you, or hasn't it had consequences?

■ *PM*: Working as a soloist has its pros and cons. One of the down sides is that you don't share the fullness of those moments with a group, that you don't get help when you are most in need of it. The up side of being alone is that I don't have to be in a system which would probably not allow me to develop; that I can make use of my time, that I can come and go when I want, and try to live the life I prefer. And if at some point the quality of my energy should decrease, then I have the responsibility to rest so it will rise again.

In other words, I depend more on my own cycles, my internal reactions, and perhaps because of this I will last longer and will be able to give my performances with more power and quality. But if you are in a particular system, the system doesn't care if

you're going through a transitional stage in your own life, or if you have an injured knee. You have to be a productive element for the company; that's what matters.

Being a soloist is a big responsibility. You must always try to have your body and the image you project on stage be alive. I'm a soloist because I was "born that way." This doesn't make me better or worse than other dancers. It means that since I was a child my teachers treated me as a soloist because I knew how to move very well on stage without having to be with anybody else. And that characteristic was reinforced for me through Spanish dance and the teachers who teach you to be yourself, even if you are part of a group.

● *GR*: What would you say is the main difference between dance and any other artistic expression?

■ *PM*: Time. The body has a maturity which is written in time. At a certain age, the body no longer responds in the same way, although you can't say the individual has "declined" and is no longer worth anything. So the passion and intensity a dancer lives between the ages of 20 and 45 are completely different from the life of a painter, a doctor, an orchestra director or a writer. We know the time will come when the body is not in optimal condition, and this produces a very rapid sensual, sexual, intellectual, motor and spiritual development.... We can't afford the luxury of losing a night, or a day, and still less four months.

People often say we are very neurotic and obsessive, but it's not so. We're upset by time because for us time does have an end, and before that end comes you have to prepare yourself for your second stage. What I mean is that when you feel your body is at its peak and you're a great dancer, you have to figure out what you will devote yourself to offstage, so you don't confront the horror of old age, drugs, death, or living off your

memories. This is why I think the dancer should be given support while he is still dancing, not when he disappears and somebody remembers that he existed once upon a time.

● *GR*: What will you devote yourself to when the time comes to retire?

■ *PM*: I plan to continue working with my body always, because it can be very destructive organically if you don't work with it. I also think I could teach many things I've learned about dance.

I also like to write. I think I am also a communication theorist in the field of the arts. And something will come of all this.

● *GR*: What do you hope to achieve? What would you like to do if you had the means?

■ *PM*: I would like to investigate the sense of humor, which we need so much; and that would doubtless lead me to work on something for children. I am also a funny person, I like to make people laugh, and I've already begun to work out some characters that do that. When I feel that my body is starting to get tired of dancing, I'm going to do work with children, because it will be important not to wither, not to die out, and children never let you do that.

● *GR*: Your greatest dream in dance....

■ *PM*: To dance every night. In any country of the world. It's my way of giving everything I have inside. There are moments when I feel stranded, without anything to say, without motivation or interest. Then I worry and ask myself what's going to happen, I have nothing to say. At those times I dedicate myself completely to technique, to caring for the body. And then, when I least expect it, comes the ear of corn which sheds its kernels for you to pick up. I begin to hear sounds everywhere and I start gathering the kernels. That is the beginning of a new performance ✎

Gabriela Rábago Palafox
Staff Writer.