



A thoroughly modern gypsy

Words by Sarah Monaghan, pictures by Sarah Monaghan and Rex

Flamenco great Joaquín Cortés is back in the UK for the première of his new show at the Royal Albert Hall. Sarah Monaghan goes to meet him

Rumours of Joaquín Cortés' ego abound. This is the bare-torso-ed flamenco superstar who has been described by the BBC as "the sexiest Spanish icon since Antonio Banderas" and whose fleet footwork once so fired up the Italian film director Bertolucci that he wrote a poem to him. Cortés obviously sets alight his female fans too – they include Madonna, Jennifer Lopez and Elle 'the Body' Macpherson: she apparently described him as "pure sex". And his glamorous private life has seen him involved with Hollywood actress Mira Sorvino and Mick Jagger's former lover Luciana Morad. He has recently extracted himself from a relationship with supermodel Naomi Campbell – herself a professional ego if ever there was one...

So meeting Cortés at his central London hotel, it's a relief to find him relaxed and smiling warmly, casually dressed, not in his signature Armani-designed stage attire, but in faded jeans and long-sleeved, crumpled T-shirt. The hotel is a Victorian town house so it's no grand suite of rooms in which he's staying. We're cramped around a table in the corner of a rather dingy, narrow room – he scoops up my notebook with apologies when he accidentally elbows it to the floor. But he prefers hotels like this, he insists: "It's more like a home. I hate the anonymity of modern hotels."

He seems genuinely 'encantado' to meet, and it's instantly the informal 'tú'. Cortés has appeared the night before on BBC's *Strictly Dance Fever* producing an impressive display of his trademark zapateado, the rhythmic stamping and tapping of the heels characteristic of Spanish flamenco dance. He's never seen a programme quite like it, he enthuses, where ordinary people get to compete and show off their amateur gusto for dance. "I think it is fantastic," he says. "We don't have anything like this concept of show in Spain. I'm all for anything that encourages dancing. It's inspired."

A suitcase on the bed is ready to go. This is a flying visit: he's here after a three-year absence from the UK in advance of the première of his new show, *Mi Soledad*, (My Solitude) at the Royal Albert Hall on 2nd and 3rd July. He's jetting back to Spain tomorrow and then straight on to Italy and Latin America; he's just come from Mexico. Are audiences different, I wonder, in different countries? "You'd think so but no, I really don't believe they are," he says. "There aren't bad audiences, only bad shows."

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When a show is good, the public applauds whether they are Spanish, South American, Japanese, Australian, English, German or Russian...” He’s particularly looking forward, he says, to dancing again at the Royal Albert Hall: “It’s a wonderful place to perform. A magical space. For me, it’s like a bullring – big, but intimate.”

It’s a very Hispanic comparison. Cortés is of gipsy blood and was born in Cordoba in 1969. At the age of 12, he moved to Madrid where he began his dance training. He joined the Spanish National Ballet when he was 15 and quickly rose to the ranks of solo artist, touring all over the world, performing in the Metropolitan Opera House in New York and the Kremlin’s Congress Palace in Moscow. He left to work alone as a dancer and choreographer and in 1992, he formed his own Joaquín Cortés Flamenco Company.

Today he fuses traditional flamenco moves with aspects of classical dance, all melded with his own expressive personality. His knowledge of classical dance, he says, has allowed him to

create his own style. The result is a technique that seems to leave audiences spellbound worldwide. It inspires flamenco fidels though to fury. So what does he feel he has personally done for flamenco? “I’ve popularised it,” he says abruptly, in what first sounds like an admission but quickly becomes clear it is not, rather a statement of defiance. “I’m proud of what I do and of the fact that I have opened the doors of flamenco to the world.”

Cortés has also revolutionised the presentation; his performances involve dramatic costume changes, and often, the switch from traditional suited flamenco image to bare-chested sex god: “In classical ballet, they still dance with a nude torso,” he has said. “Why not in flamenco? It makes it very sensual, mystical and spiritual.” Whatever he has done, it is clearly with a gipsy spirit of rebellion...

His new show looks set to stretch his versatility further than ever, and is, he says, “deeper” than any work he has created before. It will feature the Soleá, or deep song, often considered to be the heart and soul of flamenco

Above, left to right

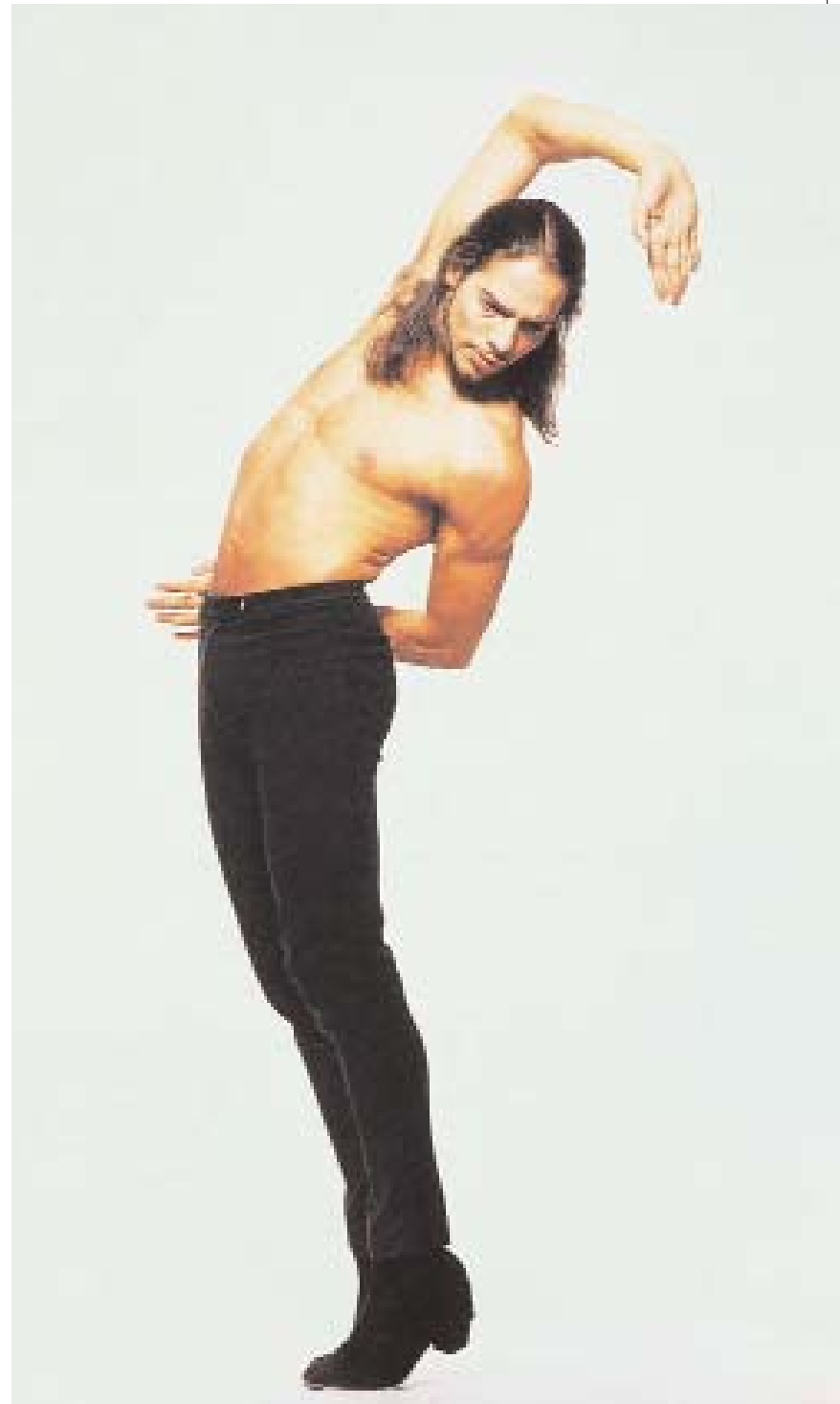
Cortés with one of his many celebrated female fans: here British actress Emma Thompson; Cortés with Naomi Campbell; Cortés’ costumes have been designed by Giorgio Armani for over 10 years: “I like his style the most”

and the least accessible, but also the most intense. He’ll be performing alone on a stage set that will be deliberately minimalist, the mood painted by the skills of musicians who have worked with him over the course of his career. There’ll be a large element of improvisation: “I put myself inside myself,” he says. “This is a journey through feelings, of insecurities and fears. A lot of things happen to us in our lives, good and bad, and as you get older, you realise that you are essentially alone.” The main emotion will be loneliness, but one that is understood and charged with intimacy.

Right now, though, Cortés is rarely alone. He travels constantly, like a true gipsy. Is it not tiring? “I don’t see it as a job,” he says. “I’m genuinely happiest when I’m dancing. I love it. I know I’m very privileged.”



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**Above, left and right**

Cortés in matador dress: despite the innovations he has brought to the world of flamenco dance, he remains true to his gipsy roots; Cortés' dance technique is typified by graceful arm and hand movements as well as that of his long flowing hair

Home is a large family house in central Madrid that he visits "not often enough": "I miss my family when I'm on tour," he says. He has two sisters, one older, one younger: "We all share a love of flamenco. It's in our blood. We grew up with it," he says. Unlike other celebrities, he does not have multiple homes around the world: "I'm too nomadic now to have time to be in one place," he says, "but if I did, it would be an island, somewhere warm, where I could go on holiday with my family. I couldn't live in northern Europe. I need the sun."

Now 35, Cortés has talked in the past about retiring in his thirties – is it still on the cards?

"A few years ago, I did think I would be hanging my boots up by now and devoting myself to other things but I've surprised myself. Each year that goes past I find myself better: physically stronger and with an appetite to do

more," he says. He will stop dancing, he says, when he feels it is the right time, but in the meantime, he has recently set up a new touring company, *Gitana Cortés*, aimed at showcasing Spain's most promising new dancers. "It's my duty to support the younger generation and to ensure there is quality. I want to be an example and to help maintain the quality of Spanish flamenco," he says.

Shunning the hotel's smart lift in favour of a dash down three flights of stairs, we're out on the street now for photos. Cortés poses for the camera, managing to look both practised and artless, as we head out towards Marble Arch and Oxford Street. We part on the corner, where he gives me the informal Spanish-style double-cheek peck, and then, with a "Cuidate" ("Take care"), he's gone, off on his travels again, his trainers two-stepping into the crowd...

Ticket booking details

For more details on booking tickets for Joaquín Cortés in *Mi Soledad* on Saturday 2nd July and Sunday 3rd July at 7.30pm at the Royal Albert Hall, call: 0207 589 8212 or 0207 434 2222 or visit: www.ticketline.co.uk