

## **La Bella Otero, the Belle Époque performer who longed to be Carmen, the Ballet Nacional de España's next world premiere**

- *The dramatic ballet created and directed by Rubén Olmo is a reflection on success and loneliness, blending different styles of dance and music*
- *Patricia Guerrero and Maribel Gallardo will star in the production from 7<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> July at Madrid's Teatro de la Zarzuela*

Madrid, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2021. The Ballet Nacional de España will premiere **La Bella Otero from 7<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> July at Madrid's Teatro de la Zarzuela**. This dramatic ballet, created and directed by **Rubén Olmo**, tells the intense story of Carolina Otero, one of the most famous and influential dancers of the late nineteenth century. A world-renowned Spanish performer, her name is known across the globe, although her story remains unfamiliar to many. She was a woman from a Galician village who reinvented herself following a traumatic event in her childhood. Guided by Mérimée's Carmen, she used men to advance her artistic career and was admired by kings throughout Europe, although the only love into whose arms she ultimately fell was gambling. *La Bella Otero* is a reflection on abuse, ambition, success, the inability to love and loneliness.

Rubén Olmo, director of the Ballet Nacional de España, had wanted to create a choreography about La Bella Otero for many years, captivated by the fact that one of the most famous women of her time came from a village in Pontevedra. However, it was not until he was appointed director in 2019 that he found the opportunity he had been waiting for to realise the production as he had imagined it: a large-scale show, both in terms of the number of dancers and the elaborate costumes.

"The spirit of the two most recent programmes we premiered was to celebrate Spanish dance in all its styles. This time, however, I have placed dance at the service of the narrative in order to achieve the fusion that would allow me to tell the life story of an extraordinary woman, using everything from folklore and contemporary dance to stylised dance and flamenco," explains Rubén Olmo. "It is a deeply moving and dramatic production because it tells the story of a woman who reaches the very top and ends up alone and forgotten."

The dramaturgy is by **Gregor Acuña-Pohl**, a regular collaborator of choreographer Johan Inger. The actor, director and dance dramaturg sought to distil the essence of the historical figure as fully as possible, retaining the key moments of her biography while leaving out anecdotal details. "For me, the most important thing was to portray a person with tremendous magnetism, charisma and strength," he emphasises. After researching Carolina Otero through books,

press cuttings, audiovisual material and archives, he selected the most representative moments of her life that could be expressed through dance.

“When writing a narrative about such a complex life, we obviously have to simplify. But we are not making a value judgement about what is right or wrong; we are simply trying to remain faithful to reality while making it compelling for the audience. Dance should move people before it passes judgement. I have tried to remain true to the historical figure and turn her story into a ballet that audiences will find engaging. Afterwards, everyone can draw their own conclusions about the character,” he adds.

## Two artists for one **Bella Otero**

The narrative of *La Bella Otero* spans different periods in Carolina Otero’s life, so Rubén Olmo chose **Patricia Guerrero** and **Maribel Gallardo** to portray the leading character at different ages. “I invited Patricia Guerrero to join the Ballet Nacional de España because she is a flamenco dancer who exudes tremendous strength on stage. She was a member of my company, and I also directed her at the Ballet Flamenco de Andalucía. She possesses the same magnetism that made *La Bella Otero* so remarkable. Today, she is one of the leading figures in the most avant-garde flamenco, and it is a privilege to have her with us,” explains Rubén Olmo. “The same is true of former Ballet Nacional de España principal dancer Maribel Gallardo. As well as being a dancer, she is a wonderful actress who has brought many characters to the stage, and she always commits herself fully to every project I propose.”

According to Patricia Guerrero, *La Bella Otero* is a complex character because she experiences a series of conflicts that turn her into a dramatic enigma. “She was a woman of great character, immense self-confidence and a formidable instinct for survival. She knew better than anyone how to use her charisma and sensuality to achieve success.” The Granada-born artist aims to translate every detail into dance so that audiences can understand this woman, whom she admires above all for her self-assurance and her ability to captivate—qualities she has drawn on to inhabit the role. “At its heart, *La Bella Otero* is a hard-hitting work, but it is also dynamic, entertaining and fresh, with a vibrancy and energy that will allow all of us, both on and off stage, to enjoy it.”

Maribel Gallardo, who portrays *La Bella Otero* in her later years, defines the character as a transgressive woman confronting a male-dominated society and acknowledges that there is something of *La Bella Otero* in every woman. For the rehearsal director and choreographer, who has performed principal roles with the Ballet Nacional de España such as *Medea* and *La Celestina*, this character is both a major source of motivation and a considerable challenge. She must engage with the choreographic language of Rubén Olmo, with whom she had not

previously worked as a dancer, while also regaining the physical condition that every dancer demands of themselves before returning to the stage.

## Music and costumes

Just as the choreography blends different dance styles, the music for *La Bella Otero* incorporates compositions by a range of composers and in a variety of forms into its symphonic score. Composer and conductor **Manuel Busto** coordinated the creation of the score, with contributions from **Alejandro Cruz Benavides** and **Agustín Diassera**. Guitarists **Diego Losada**, **Víctor Márquez**, **Enrique Bermúdez** and **Pau Vallet** also contributed flamenco compositions, while the group **Rarefolk** evokes the Galician setting with its distinctive psychedelic Celtic rock. The work also includes excerpts from Bizet's opera *Carmen* and the zarzuela *El año pasado por agua*, by Chueca and Valverde.

"My main challenge when developing the arrangements and orchestrations was to ensure that they retained every bit of their original freshness and personality, while becoming naturally integrated into the work," explains Manuel Busto. The final result "is music conceived without prejudice and unwilling to renounce anything".

The **Orchestra of the Community of Madrid (ORCAM)** will perform the score live at the Teatro de la Zarzuela under the direction of Manuel Busto. The original music has also been recorded by students from the **Barenboim-Said Foundation** for use in performances at theatres without a live orchestra, as well as during rehearsals.

Designer **Yaiza Pinillos** has created almost 200 costume designs for the scenes in *La Bella Otero*, which are set in a wide variety of places and situations. The Canary Islands-born designer drew on numerous sources of inspiration and research, ranging from the photographs of José Ortiz Echagüe to paintings by Zuloaga, Manet, Ramón Casas, Boldini and José Cardona. The costumes also feature reinterpretations of designs by Jacques Doucet and Balenciaga, and even by contemporary fashion designers such as Issey Miyake and Alexander McQueen, which produce surprising results when viewed through the lens of the Belle Époque.

The centrepiece of the protagonist's wardrobe is the Byzantine-style beaded costume worn by La Bella Otero in one of her most iconic portraits, photographed by Reutlinger. "I am particularly proud of this design because it is a reinterpretation of that well-known image of Otero. I believe we have been able to enrich it through an approach that evokes rather than imitates it, adding effects that enhance the staging and reflect the essence of an era."

One of the designer's main challenges was to reconcile the narrative function of the costumes with freedom of movement and the need for rapid changes between scenes. This was made even more complex by the characterisation of

the roles, which involves wigs, beards, moustaches and hats in order to portray the period in which the story takes place as faithfully as possible.

### **Set and lighting design**

The challenge for set designer **Eduardo Moreno**, in his first collaboration with the Ballet Nacional de España, was to enhance the pace of the transitions between scenes, as the work's dramaturgy demands great fluidity while moving through many different moments in La Bella Otero's life. His design structures the space around a large architectural feature—a dome—that frames the entire performance and accommodates the different scenes, distinguished by simple elements identifying each period and location. It also meets the requirement that the production should be able to tour easily to different theatres, in keeping with the Ballet Nacional de España's touring vocation.

**Juan Gómez-Cornejo**, winner of the National Theatre Award, was given the difficult task of enveloping La Bella Otero in light. "The lighting must accompany, embrace and support the dancers and, if possible, caress them, so that the story reaches the audience with the greatest possible clarity and with the same emotion with which it was created." The lighting travels through the character's story, helping to recreate the places and situations she experienced, from a rural Galicia reminiscent of Goya's Black Paintings to the Portuguese countryside illuminated by a full moon and the dazzling lights of theatres and casinos.

Following its premiere in Madrid, the Ballet Nacional de España will perform *La Bella Otero* on **26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> May 2022** at the **Teatro de la Maestranza in Seville**. Before then, it will close the 2020/2021 season by taking part in the **Santander International Festival on 7<sup>th</sup> August** with the programme *Invocación*. Unusually, the Ballet Nacional de España will perform in Madrid on three occasions this year. Following the world premiere of *La Bella Otero*, **Centenario Antonio Ruiz Soler** is scheduled at the **Teatro Real** from **13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> October**, and *Invocación* at the **Teatro de la Zarzuela** from **10<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> December**.

## About the Ballet Nacional de España

The Ballet Nacional de España (BNE) has been Spain's leading public company for Spanish dance since it was founded in 1978 under the name Ballet Nacional Español, with Antonio Gades as its first director. It is one of the production units of the National Institute of the Performing Arts and Music (INAEM), which forms part of the Ministry of Culture and Sport. The BNE's mission is to preserve, promote and pass on Spain's rich choreographic heritage, embracing its stylistic diversity and traditions through its different forms: classical dance, stylised dance, folklore, escuela bolera and flamenco. It also works to bring Spanish dance closer to new audiences and strengthen its national and international profile within a framework of full artistic and creative autonomy.

## Rubén Olmo, director of Ballet Nacional de España

Rubén Olmo, winner of the 2015 National Dance Award, joined the Ballet Nacional de España in September 2019 with the aim of preserving, promoting and expanding the reach of the traditional Spanish Dance repertoire, while also incorporating new creations and opening the company to avant-garde approaches and experimentation. This marks his second period with the BNE, having previously danced with the company from 1998 to 2002.

From 2011, he served as director of the Ballet Flamenco de Andalucía, an institution belonging to the Regional Government of Andalusia, where he premiered his own productions, including *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* and *La muerte de un minotauro*. Before that, he founded his own company, for which he created productions such as *Érase una vez*, *Belmonte*, *Las tentaciones de Poe*, *Horas contigo*, *Naturalmente Flamenco* and *Diálogo de Navegante*. He has also worked as a choreographer and dancer with leading figures in Spanish Dance, including Aída Gómez, Antonio Najarro, Eva Yerbabuena, Víctor Ullate, Antonio Canales, Rafael Amargo, Isabel Bayón and Rafaela Carrasco.

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