

8km en mula / Bach

ÁLVARO MURILLO / MAL PELO

Shades of Spain



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On the occasion of this year's Europalia festival dedicated to Spain, two artists visit STUK with works that reexamine tradition through the body. Both enter into dialogue with well-known artistic expressions, Flamenco and Bach respectively, but explore distinct affective landscapes. Álvaro Murillo's '*8km en mula*' confronts the audience with raw force in a muscle-straining display of Flamenco, while Mal Pelo's '*Bach*' develops quietly, carefully weaving a space for prolonged corporeal attention.

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Álvaro Murillo enters the STUK café as if he had stepped down straight from the streets of Seville. Like in a traditional flamenco setting, he carries a wooden board and places it on the floor, dressed in a black leather jacket and jeans. His long, unruly beard and erect posture cultivate a deliberately masculine presence, make him look like a proper 'bad boy' of flamenco. The performance's most compelling moment takes place at the beginning, when Murillo slows down recognisable flamenco movements to an almost extreme degree. His gestures hang in suspension. You can see every muscle quiver under tension, sometimes stretching almost painfully. There is a strange, ecstatic intensity in the movements. Here, the primitive drive of flamenco meets a contemporary structural awareness, informed by Murillo's exploration of biomechanics and the neuroscience of movement.

What follows are several shorter sequences on the wooden board, where traditional footwork gives way to more idiosyncratic expressions of the upper body and hands. The performance negotiate a delicate balance between rhythmic precision and personal freedom. In the final moments, Murillo circles the audience, offering sharp bursts of footwork and brief flamenco phrases to individual spectators. In just twenty minutes, he demonstrates a concentrated glimpse of his physical and expressive capacities. Unfortunately, the casual and

restless atmosphere in the cafe, where audience members were leaving early in anticipation of the next piece, meant that this demanding and meticulous performance ultimately did not receive the attention and respect it deserved.

Time and meditation

After the almost violent intensity of Murillo's piece, I follow the crowd to STUK's main Soetezaal venue for Mal Pelo's '*Bach'. This piece stands in stark contrast to the preceding one. Here,* we are engrossed in a meditation on duration, listening, and attention between different media. María Muñoz steps onto a sparse stage marked by a rectangular white mat stretching across the floor and climbing the back wall, forming a serene, ascetic frame. Her figure is bathing in warm orange light. Small in stature and visibly aged, dressed in a black suit with her slick hair slung backwards in a braid, Muñoz excudes presence, focus, and acute awarness. Bach's '*Das Wohltemperierte Klavier'* fills the space, providing the structuring force with which she enters into a prolonged corporeal dialogue. Within Mal Pelo's long engagement with Bach, the music becomes a study of movement itself: of rhythm, gaze, respiration, and presence. Muñoz dances a selection of preludes to the piano music, while some passages emerge from memory and are performed in silence. These quiet moments allow space for breath and for music to be registered internally. At times, Muñoz stands with her back to the audience, tapping the floor with her feet (gestures that recall the earlier flamenco, though perhaps only because Murillo's gestures still dance before my minds' eye). She moves, stops, listens. Then moves again.

Her movement language flows through seamless transitions and undulating shifts, guided by subtle weight changes and gentle leaps that gradually stretch her presence across the space. What begins along a restrained, horizontal path, perpendicular to the audience, slowly opens into sweeping circles and trajectories. A recurring sense of lightness, almost flight, pervades. At moments, the fluidity and openness of her phrasing evokes associations with the spirit of Isadora Duncan, though this austere work seems anchored as much in the rigor and precision of postmodern dance. The boundary between historical lineages feels thin and permeable, dissolving into one another.

It feels like an acceptance: of the joys and disappointments they have shared before

Alongside this intricate movements, video interventions punctuate the choreography without overwhelming it. Close-ups of Muñoz's eyes are projected onto the floor, glancing from side to side, while later her hands appear on the back wall, wrinkled and attentive, tracing the space as if mapping time itself. At one point, her body is doubled by a blurred, low-resolution projection: a moving silhouette that communicates with her live presence. Not all visual elements carry same dramaturgical weight; some drift loosely, and the work's overall duration stretches slightly beyond its most concentrated intensity. Yet these moments resist a polished narrative of ageing, allowing the traces of time to intertwine with the fluidity of her movements.

What stays with you is how Muñoz's moves and negotiates with time, music, memory, and history. In the final moments, the works' affective center transforms, taking us by suprise. Muñoz addresses the audience, noting that ' *Bach' as a piece* is now twenty years old, and invites her partner Pep Ramis onto the stage. What we witness is disarmingly emotional. Ramis enters first, dancing alone, grey-haired, dressed in black, before Muñoz joins him. Their brief shared dance, their perfect interaction and their deep bond, bound by decades of

memories, leaves the room achingly quiet. Finally, they turn and walk together into the darkness in the back of the stage. It feels like an acceptance: of the joys and disappointments they have shared before, and of the unknown that lies ahead them.