Learn flamenco in Geylang

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His lightning-quick steps have taken veteran flamenco dancer Antonio Vargas around the world. But the jetsetter, who has worked with the likes of director John Woo and performed with The Beatles, is moving to a different beat these days.

The 69-year-old has put down roots in Singapore, starting a family here and opening a dance school.

Casablanca-born Vargas, who can look back on an illustrious career in Spain as a flamenco dancer, started the school in Geylang with his Singaporean wife, Dr Daphne Huang, 37, last year.

The pair live above the dance studio of Los Tarantos – the name is inspired by a famous Spanish song – with a four-year-old son and 20-month-old daughter.

He teaches flamenco to about 85 students, along with the Spanish guitar and the percussion instrument cajon, and when he is not doing that, he designs sets for his latest productions. His school staged its first recital, The Spirit Of Dance, at the University Cultural Centre two weeks ago.

Flamenco is a dance style native to Spain and originated from the culture of Andalusian gypsies.

During the interview with Life!, the dancer, dressed in a singlet and black trousers, often gesticulated with his expressive hands, and even stamped out a rapid beat with his feet while waiting to be photographed.

It was the passionate dance of flamenco that brought him and Huang together. They met at a flamenco workshop in Perth in 2002, and again at a workshop in Singapore later that year.

These days, Huang, a doctor by profession, has cut down her medical practice for a part-time job to help out with the dance school.

Opening a dance school with a famous flamenco dancer was an incredible experience, says Dr Huang, who started training in contemporary dance as a hobby when she was at school.

"Opening it was a leap of faith," she says. "But I wanted to create an ambience and platform for flamenco dance in Singapore."

The pair feel that the Spanish dance form is slowly gaining momentum in Singapore.

"The arts is getting more attention in general in Singapore. Every year, a famous flamenco dancer visits Singapore," notes Vargas.

The setting of a family home-cum-dance studio in Geylang seems like a far cry from his glamorous lifestyle performing the exacting, fiery dance to adoring crowds in Europe and elsewhere.

It was flamenco's fiery passion that brought Antonio Vargas (right) and Dr Daphne Huang together. The couple have a residence-cum-studio to cater to the growing interest in the dance form. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

Indeed, the talented dancer started his own dance company as a 22-year-old in Spain.

His career has seen him getting involved in several projects. He worked on a television show with The Beatles in 1964 and in John Woo's Mission Impossible II (2000) which starred Tom Cruise and operas including Carmen.

"When you get to be my age, the time has come to contemplate your experiences and share them with people, and pass it on, " he says. He is a little frustrated with some industry standards in Singapore – he complains about the limitations of set-building here - but chooses to tackle it hands-on by building parts of his set in his backyard.

He could not get enough of the stirring melodies and the sharp tempo of the steps that accompanied its strings. "While all my schoolmates were playing football, I would put on boots and stomp around in the backyard whenever I got a chance," the maestro says with a laugh.

Now, the dancer hopes to spread his love for the art form:

"Contrary to popular belief, you don't have to learn flamenco only in Spain. If you have a good teacher who gives you good training and foundation, you are on your way."

For more information on classes, go to www.lostarantos.com.sg.