



LOSER LIKE ISRAEL GALVÁN: EPIC FAILS IN *LA FIESTA*

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Daniel Valtueña

The Graduate Center, City University of New York
(dvaltuena@gradcenter.cuny.edu)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4526-8281>



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Abstract: This article aims to update generally assumed readings on Spanish *bailaor* Israel Galván regarding solitude (Didi-Huberman) and silence (Frayssinet Savy) by interrogating his show *La fiesta* (2017). *La fiesta* contributes to a reevaluation of his solo career as a flamenco dancer and deliberately proposes a non-normative flamenco universe that searches for alternative modes of dancing. Moved by notions such as failure, forgetfulness, and stupidity (Halberstam) I will demonstrate how celebratory spaces and times such as the one evoked by Galván facilitate actions and movements outside of the limits normativity imposes.

Key Words: Israel Galván, party, failure, solitude, silence, flamenco.

Resumen: Este trabajo propone actualizar lecturas generalmente aceptadas en torno a la figura del bailaor español Israel Galván en relación con las nociones de soledad (Didi-Huberman) y silencio (Frayssinet Savy) por medio de una aproximación a su espectáculo *La fiesta* (2017).

La fiesta contribuye a una reevaluación de su trayectoria como bailaor solista y propone deliberadamente un universo flamenco no normativo que aspira a formas alternativas de danza. Inspirado por nociones como las de fracaso, olvido y estupidez (Halberstam) demostraré cómo espacios y tiempos de celebración como el evocado por Galván facilitan acciones y movimientos fuera de los límites impuestos por la normatividad.

Palabras clave: Israel Galván, fiesta, fracaso, soledad, silencio, flamenco.

Summary: 1. Hangover of Solitude and Silence. 2. Unfulfilled Flamenco Promises. 3. Celebrating Failure, Forgetfulness, and Stupidity. 4. To Conclude. 5. Words Cited. 6. Notes.

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DANIEL VALTUEÑA is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Latin American, Iberian, and Latino Cultures at The Graduate Center (CUNY), a Mellon Humanities Public Fellow at the same institution and an adjunct instructor at Baruch College (CUNY). He earned his BA in Art History at Universidad Complutense de Madrid and his research focuses on contemporary Iberian cultures and queer theories. His work explores the notion of celebration from both theoretical and curatorial perspectives, and his dissertation will address contemporary Iberian artistic practices in the intersection of queer and national identities. In 2012 he was awarded the Certamen Nacional Jóvenes Investigadores by the Spanish Government for his early research initiatives and received the Premio Talento Joven in the category of Culture by the Madrid Region in 2015 for his arts management trajectory.

On the sixteenth episode of the second season of the US musical TV show *Glee* (2009-2015), the choir New Directions, whose members drive the plot of the show, sings a cover of the original song *Loser Like Me* in a competition. Mostly comprised of bullied students from the William McKinley High School in Lima (Ohio), the glee club is a safe space where individuals who love singing find a place to be themselves. *Loser Like Me* comes after the main female character of the show, Rachel Berry (Lea Michele), sings a song she composed entitled *Get it Right*. This song reflects on frustration and disappointment with despairing questions such as «How many times will it take for me to get it right?» or «What can you do when your good isn't good enough?» While *Get it Right* can be considered a pessimistic song, *Loser Like Me* celebrates difference and joyfully affirms the identities the members of New Directions embody. Even though the glee club finally wins the competition and both songs partly stand for some of the principles of the American dream and contribute to reinforce the neoliberal motto of being yourself, I argue that if we pay special attention to the lyrics of both songs, especially *Loser Like Me*, a space for failure opens up and is claimed as an alternative mode of being.

Informed by an archive on popular cultural objects, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011) by queer theorist Jack Halberstam relies on the notion of failure as an opportunity for queer individuals to exist differently outside the imposed limits of normativity. Inspired by Halberstam's arguments on this matter, I want to interrogate Spanish *bailaor* Israel Galván's practice in order to argue how his dancing deliberately fails by proposing innovative movements and actions for flamenco dance. Calling on Galván's show *La fiesta* (2017) I will challenge recent readings on his practice which have limited a further understanding of his trajectory. More specifically, I will argue how *La fiesta* neutralizes the notions of solitude and silence which inform Georges Didi-Huberman's and Corinne Frayssinet Savy's monographs on Israel Galván respectively. In so doing, I will call for a reading of Israel Galván's dancing based in notions such as failure, forgetfulness, and stupidity, which open the door for alternative interpretations of his figure and raise new questions about the celebratory spaces and times evoked in *La fiesta*.

1. ISRAEL GALVÁN OPENS THE FLOOR

Israel Galván is one of the most influential *bailaores* or flamenco dancers today. Born in the Spanish city of Seville in 1973, he was raised by flamenco dancers as well: both his mother, Eugenia de los Reyes, and his father, José Galván, had well-established careers as flamenco performers and even owned a dance school where Israel started his training at a young age. During his childhood, he participated in his parents' late-night shows and acquired important experience as a flamenco dancer performing in front of an audience. In Sevillian *tablaos*, people got to know the young promising performer whose dancing qualities would decide his future as a *bailaor*. His father was especially determined to make his child an influential flamenco dancer even if Galván's childhood dreams were of playing soccer in the Seville-based team Real Betis. Nonetheless, when he became an adult and after a whole life dancing, he decided to continue with his career as a *bailaor*.

In 1992, influential flamenco dancer Mario Maya¹ invited Israel to join his company. Mario Maya's mastery was crucially influential for Galván's future as a dancer. Once established as a professional dancer after joining the company, Israel Galván earned a reputation as one of the best flamenco dancers of his generation. In 1994 he joined the new Compañía Andaluza de Danza where he performed as a soloist. In the same years he participated in Carlos Saura's film *Flamenco* (1995) featuring flamenco artists such as Enrique Morente, Farruco, La Paquera de Jerez, Manuel Agujetas, and Paco de Lucía and won most of flamenco competitions in which he participated. Especially worth mentioning are the prizes he won in two of the most internationally-known competitions: the Desplante Minero at the Festival del Cante de las Minas de la Unión and the Giraldillo de Jóvenes Intérpretes at the Bienal de Sevilla, both in 1996.

In 1998, Israel Galván premiered his first solo show. In collaboration with renowned flamenco artists such as Manuel Soler and under the artistic direction of Pepa Gamboa and Pedro G. Romero,² Galván, drawing inspiration from Hans Christian Andersen's story *The Red Shoes*, reflected on two heterodox flamenco figures, Félix el Loco and Vicente Escudero. *¡Mira!* premiered at the Bienal de Sevilla to a considerable acclaim, inaugurating a fruitful collaboration with the renowned flamenco festival. Israel Galván would go on to premier other shows in

future editions of the festival, such as *La metamorfosis* (2000), *Galvánicas* (2002), and *Arena* (2004).³

In all of his solo shows, Galván experiments with the limits of flamenco dance by incorporating other disciplines into his creative processes. He integrates narrative into choreographies such as *¡Mira!* and *La metamorfosis* –inspired by Franz Kafka’s text– and reflects on avant-garde flamenco figures in other shows such as *La edad de oro* (2005) or *La curva* (2010). Galván’s vision of flamenco dance has also been coloured by cinema such as in *El final de este estado de cosas, redux* (2008) –partly influenced by Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979)– and has employed innovative spatial explorations in *Arena* and *Solo* (2007).⁴ Moreover, his collaborations with artists outside flamenco have helped him continue to develop as a dancer and have opened his career to new audiences. Among all of his non-flamenco collaborators, the most remarkable is dancer and choreographer Akram Khan with whom Galván premiered the show *Torobaka* in 2014. Khan’s Bangladesh origins exposed Galván to a new understanding of movement which he periodically calls up on along with his recurrent references to Japanese butoh dance.⁵ More recently, Israel Galván has demonstrated an interest in machines and new technologies with the shows *Coplas mecánicas*, in collaboration with *cantaor* or flamenco singer Niño de Elche⁶ and premiered in the frame of the electronic music festival Sónar Barcelona 2018, and *Israel e³ Israel* (2019) premiered in the Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media in the Japanese city of Tokyo. Last but not least, it is worth mentioning Galván’s most recent reinterpretation of Manuel de Falla’s *El amor brujo* costumed as his aunt Eduarda de los Reyes, as an instance of his recurrent exploration, the one of the cross-dressing, previously and partially explored in shows such as *El final de este estado de cosas, redux* or *Fla.co.men* (2014).

In 2005 Israel Galván was awarded the Premio Nacional de Danza while at the same time non-flamenco competitions and awards also began to recognize his body of work. Galván started to develop strong and solid relationships with international, and more specifically, French audiences, institutions, and critics. In 2010 he was invited to join the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris as an associated artist. More recently, the Festival d’Avignon –probably the most relevant performing arts festival in France and one of the most influential worldwide– coproduced his show *La fiesta* at the *coeur d’honneur* of the Palais des papes. Along

with his continuous performances in France, critics and scholars have developed an increasing interest in his work. The most influential text published on Israel Galván is probably *Le danseur des solitudes* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 2006) by French intellectual and philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman, also known for his work on art historian Aby Warburg or his more recent explorations on political movements and social uprisings. Corine Frayssinet Savy's *Israel Galván, danser le silence: une anthropologie historique de la danse flamenco* (Actes Sud, 2009) is also notably relevant.

In both cases, the authors explore the particularities Israel Galván embodies by highlighting two notions considered to be distinctive of his practice: solitude in Didi-Huberman's case and silence in Frayssinet Savy's. Even though solitude and silence are two undeniable characteristics in most of his choreographies, in the following section I would like to explore the limitations of these two notions which, while undeniably inspiring for a fruitful understanding of Israel Galván's oeuvre, have simultaneously overlooked some of Galván's ideas on flamenco that, I argue, are necessary for an appropriate approach to his show *La fiesta*.

2. HANGOVER OF SOLITUDE AND SILENCE

Inspired by Israel Galván's show *Arena*, Georges Didi-Huberman wrote a meticulous monograph which addresses Galván's flamenco dance. Didi-Huberman's taste for topics related to Spanish culture has been demonstrated elsewhere⁷ but this text concentrates on some of his ideas on flamenco and bullfighting. Drawing from Spanish poets such as Juan de la Cruz and José Bergamín but also thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Gilles Deleuze, Didi-Huberman writes on Galván's *Arena* in order to reflect on the tragic notion of solitude.

Arena, premiered in 2004 in the frame of the Bienal de Flamenco de Sevilla, was subtitled «*six coreografías de Israel Galván para el mundo de los toros*» (six choreographies by Israel Galván for the world of bullfighting), and was divided into six *cuadros* or scenes, each titled after the name of six bulls which had killed six *toreros*. Galván's approach to bullfighting does not fall into a clichéd vision of popular Spanish images; rather, he explicitly addresses the contradictions of this *fiesta* by putting the violence at the center of his dancing. Both Galván in

Arena and Didi-Huberman in his text, like many others before them, underline the parallels between the figures of the *bailaor* and the *torero*. Grounding his argument in Nietzsche's ideas on the birth of the tragedy, Didi-Huberman wonders whether Galván's *Arena* could be considered a »contemporary birth of the tragedy»⁸ (179), focusing on the idea of the self which founds both Greek tragedies and flamenco dance. Like in tragic plays, Didi-Huberman claims that flamenco –also known as «*arte jondo*» or «*hondo*»– addresses topics traditionally considered to be «deep» (16). Following Nietzsche's ideas, Didi-Huberman highlights the tragic component underlying Galván's dancing and argues that by renouncing to himself, the *bailaor* dances not alone but with his own solitude (87). In conceiving solitude as a dance-partner Didi-Huberman makes of Galván a dancer who destabilizes the collective principle of dance (9) and who decides to lose himself in the search of his own loneliness (25). For Didi-Huberman, moving alone on stage allows Galván to explore the transcendent implications of flamenco dancing.

While the notion of solitude is at the core of Didi-Huberman's book, other related concepts such as immobility and silence also appear in the text. The French intellectual states how Galván dances even when he stops moving (113) and achieves a state of «masterful immobility» which allows him to silence his gestures (114).⁹ Following this line of thought and referencing some of Didi-Huberman's ideas, Corinne Frayssinet Savy centers her reflections on Galván around the notion of silence. For Frayssinet Savy, silence is at the very core of Galván's choreographies and it shows up in the shape of his stasis on stage (79). She argues that Galván does not contrast the idea of immobility with the notion of movement, but rather considers his movement towards interiority a radical statement against a traditional version of flamenco dance (80). By stopping his dance and listening to the silence, Israel Galván puts stillness at the center of his movement explorations (62) thus opening the door to new languages and new directions in his mode of dancing (82). Just as solitude in Didi-Huberman's reflections, silence is for Frayssinet Savy a conscious practice that allows Galván to reflect on his own dancing while moving on stage.

Solitude and silence are two fundamental notions to understand Galván's innovations within flamenco. As the artist has himself stated in multiple occasions, dancing alone had been, until the premiere of *La fiesta* in 2017,¹⁰ his natural way of performing, and silence allowed

him to listen to his body and make music out of it.¹¹ It could be argued that the show that best concentrates Didi-Huberman's and Frayssinet Savy's ideas on Galván is *Solo*. Premiered in 2007, *Solo* is a solo dance show where Israel performs with no musical accompaniment at all, surrounded by a limited audience, and conceived to be performed outdoors or on non-conventional stages. The *bailaor* moves in a forty-five-minute show on a particular *tablaó* specifically built for the show where Galván freely dances making the most of its foldable sections and destabilizing springs. The minimalist format Israel Galván chose for this show as well as its duration, flexibility, and improvisational tone connected *Solo* to performance art practices that Galván had already explored in some of his previous shows on stage. *Solo* could be related to previous contemporary dance explorations and seem to be a transgressive move within flamenco. However, the figure who actually inspired this solo show was Spanish *bailaor* Vicente Escudero.¹²

Israel Galván has been inspired by Vicente Escudero's avant-garde vision of flamenco dance from the beginning of his solo career as mentioned above in relation to the shows *¡Mira!* and *La curva*.¹³ Pedro G. Romero has also emphasized the relationship between these two flamenco dancers whose concordances cannot be denied.¹⁴ In *Solo*, Israel Galván reenacts the silent dance described in Escudero's book *Mi baile*. Escudero's *Ritmos sin música* was premiered in Paris and the dancer underlines in his description how he made music with his feet, his hands, and even his nails –these sounds helped him choreograph improvised movements on stage (124). Escudero and Galván also share a special interest in the sound and choreographic possibilities of machinery. In Vicente Escudero's case, one could mention his choreography after the sounds produced by a train (43) and his dream-inspired dance accompanied by two motors (114). In his memoirs, Escudero also describes how heterodox his relationship to flamenco rhythms was (47-59), which Galván also embodies by being known for challenging traditional *palos*.¹⁵ The relationship between Escudero and the avant-garde movements of his time, especially Cubism, can be aligned with the deconstruction of flamenco credited to Israel Galván.

The documented parallels between Vicente Escudero and Israel Galván also appear in relation to the concepts of solitude and silence. Escudero's *Décálogo del buen bailarín* (1951) is a set of ten principles that he considered had to rule male dancer's movements. In relation to Galván,

I am specifically interested in Escudero's second principle –«*sobriedad*» which can be partially translated for «sobriety» but also «rigor», «temperance», or «soberness»– since it is explicitly connected to the notions of solitude and silence addressed by Didi-Huberman and Frayssinet Savy. I will not address here how the prescriptive and normative criteria of Escudero's *Decálogo* have shaped male flamenco dancing. However, I think it is worth showing how a meant-to-be transgressive and heterodox flamenco figure such as Israel Galván turns into a mythical and auratic dancer when exclusively addressing his practice through categories such as solitude and silence. I do not consider this the authors' responsibility, but I want to argue that Frayssinet Savy's text and especially Didi-Huberman's *Le danseur des solitudes* have led critics to read Israel Galván's work, even choreographies premiered after these books were published, through the lens of these two concepts. Didi-Huberman's influential voice within contemporary thought has tied Israel Galván's figure with bullfighting and most of the writing on the dancer has situated his practice in a sense of mastery and success whose normative implications tend to freeze any further reading. For this reason, rather than addressing Israel Galván's practice as a successful career which pushes the limits of flamenco dancing, I would like to refocus my reading and think about his more recent movement explorations as a constant failure in the eyes of normativity.

Israel Galván has described on multiple occasions how he was seeking freedom rather than virtuosity when he set out upon a career as a solo dancer.¹⁶ He did not want to dance properly, he says, but to build his own language.¹⁷ Among all his shows, *La fiesta* is the best example of this continuous search for artistic freedom. *La fiesta* easily neutralizes any reading through the lens of solitude and silence, since eight performers join Israel on stage for a celebratory show where sound is absolutely crucial for an enlightened understanding of this choreography. *La fiesta* could be described as a gathering of losers –a piece which itself deliberately fails. Audiences and critics who were looking forward to a new performance featuring flamenco star Israel Galván were not pleased by what they saw.¹⁸ Rather, they considered *La fiesta* to be a failure. From my perspective, this is exactly what Israel Galván was aiming for.

3. UNFULFILLED FLAMENCO PROMISES

By the time he was four, Israel Galván's parents often brought him onto stage to dance in their performances in Seville. Then, after the audience was gone, the after party started. Galván remembers this part of his life with contradictory feelings –while he enjoyed an alternative night-life where «flamencos, travesties, ventriloquists, and all kinds of artists» were his co-workers, he just wanted to sleep.¹⁹ The excess of celebration paradoxically made him feel lonely, he got used to being, but also dancing, by himself. However, after two decades of performing with his «*solitude partenaire*» (Didi-Huberman, 166) he decided to return to his childhood memories and choreograph a collective show about his time dancing as a child. His goal was not to emulate a *fiesta* easily understood as a flamenco celebration; rather, the idea was a sort of reunion among friends that happened to be witnessed by the audience when the actual party was over. The tension between a meant-to-be private party and what it is actually a public show challenged all sorts of audiences, who did not recognize either an intimate *fiesta flamenca* nor a festive flamenco show.

Premiered in May 2017 in the Austrian town of St. Pölten, Israel Galván's *La fiesta*²⁰ calls on the *fin de fiesta* moment at the end of traditional flamenco shows when artists on stage switch roles and celebrate a successful performance. Dancers sing, guitar players might dance, and singers often try to play the guitar as well. Israel Galván had already explored the *fin de fiesta* mode at the end of his show *La edad de oro*, in which *baile*, *toque*, and *cante* were strictly divided –as they usually are in flamenco performances. At the end of *La edad de oro*, Galván sang after *cantaor* Fernando Terremoto had performed, which naturally provoked laughter among the audience. By laughing, people were cheerfully acknowledging how ridiculous it was to break the rules of flamenco. However, Galván did not exclusively see the *fin de fiesta* as a celebratory appendix to the show but an opportunity to explore the possibilities of doing what performers are not supposed to do publicly on stage. For this reason, he decided to invite a diverse group of artists to perform with him. Although Israel Galván of course shared the stage with other musicians and artists, he had up until *La fiesta* primarily danced as a soloist. The furthest he had gone was dancing with objects in shows such as in *Arena* or *Lo real* (2012) but his dancing had not move towards dancing

with other people, except from *Torobaka*. However, in *La fiesta* he decided to invite a troupe of performers who would join him on stage: versatile flamenco percussionist and dancer Bobote; singer, dancer, and violinist Eloisa Cantón; renowned guitarist and Alalá founder Emilio Caracafé; Málaga-born *bailaor* Ramón Martínez; heterodox *cantaor* and versatile performer Niño de Elche; pianist and organist Alejandro Rojas Marcos; Tunisian singer Alia Sellami; and Roma flamenco female dancer Uchi.²¹ These eight artists in addition to Galván perform a singular show where the languages of flamenco, contemporary dance, performance art, and experimental music get combined in a ninety-minute performance which sincerely addresses the notion of celebration.

The show starts with Uchi and Niño de Elche entering the stage and sitting on one of the three wobbly tables covered with shells, coins, and bottle caps respectively. While singing and clapping, Bobote and Ramón Martínez appear, also clapping in Real Betis equipment and join their fellow performers on stage. At a given moment, a scream starts to be heard from the back of the theatre and Israel Galván shows up moving towards the stage in a crab-like position while playing a whistle that accompanies the performance. Once on stage, wearing a colorful flower clip on his hair, Galván starts dancing. When the performance has finished, the lights go black. Niño de Elche stands up and moves toward the front of the stage. He seems to be ready to sing but, apparently, he is not able to produce any sound. After several attempts he exits the stage and leaves the ground to Uchi who will start moving and open the floor for the rest of the performers and musicians to join the party. An improvised rave as well as an Evangelist service will make their appearance in a combination of scenes where all performers move, sing, and play in a particular celebration Pedro G. Romero, the artistic director of *La fiesta*, has described as a «*pandilla de gamberros*», (a gang of mischief makers), where the notions of ballet or choreography disappear and the audience directly confronts a group of «*cuerpos que hacen cosas*»²² (bodies doing stuff). Maybe for this reason *La fiesta* did not enjoy an unanimously positive reception at its premiere.²³ In fact, a part of the audience booed the show when it was performed at Festival d'Avignon in 2017.

The extent to which French intellectuals and artists (among others) have contributed to the image of Spanish culture, especially flamenco, is widely known. It is not my aim here to address a topic that has been brilliantly outlined by other scholars in the past. However, I would like

to call on this idea in order to better describe what I consider to be a «failed» attempt to reimagine flamenco by Israel Galván. *La fiesta* does not explicitly allude to any traditional representation of flamenco parties such as the ones that inspired pieces by US painter John Singer Sargent or Spanish artist Joaquín Sorolla. On the contrary, Galván's show carefully dissects flamenco parties by bringing alternative artistic expressions to the stage, which aim to confuse and destabilize the audience. Even in some of Israel Galván's previous shows such as *Arena* or *La edad de oro*, which claimed to be disruptive and transgressive within flamenco dance, audience members could still recognize some of the elements that preconceived representations of flamenco dancing usually involve: guitars playing, audacious singing, or solo passionate dancing performances to name just a few. However, *La fiesta* does not explicitly call on these images. Rather, it is inspired by surprising cultural objects.

Listed by Israel Galván in a digital initiative by Festival d'Avignon's Instagram account, the first key component was *bailaor* Baltasar Mathé, popularly known as «Maté sin pies». With both of his legs amputated, Mathé was a well-known flamenco performer in early-twentieth-century Spain despite his condition. *La fiesta*'s second key component was Vicente Escudero's drawings followed by José Val del Omar's moving images.²⁴ Galván lists the Man from Another Place's dance in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* as the fourth key inspiration in this show. «In *La fiesta* non-conventional and 'queer' artists, even grotesque, appear on stage performing for an audience that might not fully understand what is going on», Galván comments before concluding that a show as such «is not about understanding»²⁵. Last but not least, in this discussion of the imagery that had inspired *La fiesta*, Galván shared a comic strip from Goscinny and Uderzo's *Asterix and Obelix in Hispania* (1969) where pop culture meets Andalusian folklore. Given these references, *La fiesta* apparently aimed to emulate a flamenco party whose foundations did not match up with people's expectations.

In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) queer theorist Sara Ahmed theorizes the family as a «happy object» by arguing how «happiness creates its objects [...] accumulating positive affective value as social goods» (21). Moreover, she states «it is not that good things cause pleasure, but that the experience of pleasure is how some things become good for us» (23). Therefore, the feeling of happiness is provoked by «a world of familiar things» which informs «a horizon of likes» (24). Ahmed theorizes

happiness as a promise that individuals anticipate and consciously move toward (28-29). But what happens when promises are not fulfilled? J. L. Austin considers promises to be utterances that cannot be true or false but happy or unhappy if they fulfill, or not, the implications they establish by being stated (25-26). Hence, an unfulfilled promise would be considered unhappy by Austin. When promising, truth becomes almost irrelevant –what matters are the implications promising brings to the stage. Furthermore, Austin considers truth «an artificial abstraction which is always possible and legitimate for certain purposes» (148). Following this line of thought I think audience members, including *aficionados*, and critics who felt discouraged by Israel Galván's *La fiesta* were expecting a flamenco promise to be fulfilled. However, Galván's universe did not seem to be familiar to them and they consequently disliked the show. Rather than giving a correct answer, Israel Galván made a promise with no «happy ending» for a part of the audience who probably was looking for a «truthful» flamenco show. It could be said that Galván's promise unhappily failed.

As Jack Halberstam argues in his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, failing –something queers and outsiders are used to perform– opens the possibility of innovative approaches towards life and destabilizes the normative idea of success. By calling on objects of pop culture, Halberstam focuses on notions such as failure, forgetfulness, and stupidity in order to open the window to new approaches to human existence. In the next section I will call on Halberstam's ideas in order to argue that Israel Galván's *La fiesta* is a performance piece which challenges normative assumptions on flamenco culture by deliberately failing to adhere to any preconceived idea about flamenco parties. Moreover, I think Israel Galván's ideas on celebratory spaces and times challenge the actual concept of festivity and open the door to a yet-to-be explored new understanding of the meanings of celebration.

4. CELEBRATING FAILURE, FORGETFULNESS, AND STUPIDITY

In *The Queer Art of Failure* queer theorist Jack Halberstam theorizes the notion of failure as an alternative way of living otherwise (1-2). He argues that a conventional understanding of success relies on principles based in neoliberalism and inequality, which proposes positive thinking

and an individualistic disposition towards life as the exclusive motors of happiness (3-5). In this context, Halberstam does not theorize failure as a path towards self-confidence and resilience –which neoliberalism aligns with the notion of success– but claims the right of not being taken seriously (6) and remaining illegible for a system based on transparency and surveillance (10). For him, these alternative forms of behavior clearly connect with historical modes of living and representation within the queer community. Just as Susan Sontag defended the notion of «camp» and José Esteban Muñoz argued for untold queer futures yet to come,²⁶ Halberstam argues for a queer time where rigor and seriousness do not determine the logics of succession (75). But such an alternative way of being should not be confused with utopian desires of assimilation (52). Rather, «the queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being»(88).

When asked about *La fiesta*, Israel Galván stated he was not aiming for virtuosity. As a matter of fact, a continuous fight against mastery is what has driven his solo career. However, in *La fiesta*, Galván goes one step further and renounces both his solitude and his outstanding qualities as a flamenco dancer, in order to begin a dialogue with his fellow performers in search for artistic freedom. Galván has said that he considers *La fiesta* to be his freest creation.²⁷ As Halberstam argues in relation to the academic world, «conversation rather than mastery indeed seems to offer one very concrete way of being in relation to another form of being and knowing without seeking to measure that life modality by the standards that are external to it» (12). By opening the conversation to other interlocutors, Israel Galván's dancing becomes vulnerable and seeks alternative modes of artistic expression which «involve the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly, and the hopelessly goofy» (Halberstam 187). Along with these lines, I would like to highlight three notions Jack Halberstam pays special attention to in his text –I consider them specifically relevant for the reading of Israel Galván I propose here. In addition to the already mentioned notion of failure, forgetfulness and stupidity also seem to be fruitful lenses through which to look for an original approach to Israel Galván's figure. Thus, I will address what I consider some of the most relevant moments in *La fiesta* in order to argue the unexpected consequences its failure conveys.

More specifically, I will describe Niño de Elche's performance within the show as reflecting on the notion of failure, Israel Galván's dancing as claiming for a productive understanding of forgetfulness, and some of the rest of the cast members actions on stage as unfolding the implications of stupidity.

Niño de Elche is known for having challenged the flamenco establishment by constantly calling out the contradictions implicit in pure visions of flamenco music and the limitations public policies for flamenco artists convey.²⁸ His most remarkable recording on this matter is his *Antología del canto flamenco heterodoxo* (2018), curated by Pedro G. Romero and produced by Raül Refree, which proposes an alternative canon of flamenco music. Niño de Elche and Israel Galván share a similar vision of flamenco music and dance and their artistic collaborations seem to be a logical consequence of their thoughts on experimentation within flamenco. Niño de Elche has a prominent role in *La fiesta*; he is the collaborator who performs the most on stage during the show, even more than the actual Israel Galván. For this reason, a consideration of Niño de Elche's performance allows me to better explain, following Halberstam, the importance of failure in the show.

As described above, Niño de Elche opens the show *La fiesta* by intermittently singing on stage. After Galván's opening dance, Niño de Elche gets up and walks towards the front of the stage where he attempts to start singing. While the other two performers wearing Real Betis equipment clap their hands, he seems to be singing even though no sound is produced. He even opens his mouth and inhales in order to keep with the performance while he moves and gestures like a classical *cantaor* would do. After a few minutes trying he finally exits the stage. In a similar vein (albeit in a considerably different shape), Niño de Elche later sings in a more conventional manner. In a scene where he and all the performers in the show have waited in line in order to sing in front of one of the two microphones arranged on stage, Niño de Elche ironically waits for a public ovation and spontaneous applause which does not arrive. His confident and satisfied expression seem to acknowledge his successful singing but neither the audience nor his fellow performers seem to agree. These two moments, as well as other actions such as him humming incomprehensible melodies or playing fragmented pieces on a flamenco guitar out of tune, make me think about Niño de Elche as a performer whose actions are not easily read. For me, Niño de Elche's

performance at the beginning of the show seems to be an attempt to unsuccessfully fulfill the precepts of flamenco singing. By bodily negating the song with his silence and the principles of performance by exiting the stage, Niño de Elche seems to refuse »to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline«as Halberstam describes one possible mode of failure (88). Therefore, when Niño de Elche performs a classical flamenco song and receives no positive reaction, the audience is actually refusing mastery and making Niño de Elche fail again. But by insisting on his failures when singing unintelligible songs, Niño de Elche follows Samuel Beckett's principle, cited by Halberstam, on learning how to fail better (24). In so doing, Niño de Elche demonstrates how flamenco does not exclusively rely on musical principles but particular body gestures or performance attitudes which, coming back to Austin's principles in pragmatics, successfully fulfil some of its promises. Therefore, I think failing in his attempt to purposely sing as a traditional *cantaor* open the possibility of an alternative manner of recognizing flamenco music.

In one of the last moments of the show, Niño de Elche and Israel Galván sat facing one another, and start a dialogue based on sound experimentation with their bodies. While making their bodies vibrate and producing original sounds with their teeth, both performers babble and make disturbing noises, contributing to the dissolution of the discourse *La fiesta* proposes. Here, rather than failing, it seems as if Galván is purposely forgetting what has informed his dancing this far. In fact, Halberstam relates the notion of forgetfulness to that of failure arguing that «forgetting becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription» (15). Halberstam's work on memory critiques the reproduction of normative and oppressive modes of dominance by calling on *Finding Nemo's* character Dory who does not remember her family and moves towards a horizon of queer coalition (80). Moreover, he dedicates the fifth chapter of *The Queer Art of Failure* to the relation between homosexuality and fascism, in which he argues for honest and thorough historical discourses on queer individuals. I do not completely agree with Halberstam in relation to his theorization of forgetfulness, since change does not exclusively accompany a loss of tradition, family, or history (78). Nonetheless, I find his argument extremely interesting and suggestive for an innovative approach to remembrance. In this line

of thought, I think Israel Galván's dancing in *La fiesta* has similar implications in relation to flamenco conventions. More specifically, I think his opening dance clearly demonstrates how Galván is willing to forget, and consequently undo, his past as a flamenco dancer. After crossing the orchestra and getting to the stage, Galván does not dance standing up until the end of his dancing. Rather, he moves on his knees, crawls along the stage, hits the floor with his hands rather than with his feet, and performs in a completely horizontal position. Moreover, he even gets up but immediately falls and then tries to stand up by pulling himself up with his hand as if he were a puppet. But he fails in his attempts until the third time, at which point he jumps onto a *tabla*-like structure just before in yet another failure, the lights go down. Galván's performance does not only exclusively question the characteristic vertical position of flamenco dancing²⁹ but, from my perspective, he is deliberately undoing the received tenets of his dance training. He thus creates an innovative approach to flamenco dancing which forgets some of its traditional principles while also aiming to create alternative ways of doing. By opening the show with a *bulería*, Galván not only celebrates the beginning of this particular *fiesta*, but also incorporates an ambiguous mocking perspective which will be continually used throughout the performance.

Finally, I would like to focus on the notion of stupidity in *La fiesta*. Among the negative reviews the show has received, some called it a trick, an annoying deception –perhaps the performers were on drugs.³⁰ Meant to be an after party, the performers act as if they were drunk or under the effect of narcotic substances: the logical consequences of this altered consciousness become part of the narrative. Moreover, continuous laughs, unexpected actions, or non-conventional costumes connect the show with the notion of absurdity. But if parties were easily traceable and logically structured, would they be fun? More than a misunderstanding of what a party looks like and how it should be represented on stage, stupidity in *La fiesta* functions to break the logics of performing arts conventions while reconsidering the potentiality silly actions may have in search of alternative times and spaces. If stupidity conveys taking ourselves less seriously (Halberstam 58) and, like failure, can be considered an «alternative mode of knowing» (Halberstam 11), out-of-context actions in *La fiesta* explicitly argue for a reconsideration of the implications normative regimes have on the way we simply move –partying and celebrating appear as counter-powers against the subjugating

forces of logics. When Uchi continuously laughs on stage for no apparent reason while Alia Sellami sings and the Real Betis supporters applaud, her joy is perceived as an inappropriate reaction. But she does not give any explanations for her feeling of pleasure nor does she aim to preclude a consecutive similar reaction; paradoxically, by continuously laughing, the audience remains unhappy.

5. TO CONCLUDE

In this article my goal has been, first, to reconsider Israel Galván's flamenco dancing by calling on the two principal notions *La fiesta* proposes: collective dancing and resonant movements. Far from being a show based in solitude and silence –the two main characteristics that have driven intellectual and public discourse on Israel Galván's dancing after Georges Didi-Huberman's and Corinne Frayssinet Savy's books– *La fiesta* allows us to reconsider Israel Galván's solo trajectory and frame it as a continuous search for freedom that happens to triumph when apparently fails. Secondly, and by calling on Sara Ahmed's, J. L. Austin's, but more insistently on Jack Halberstam's ideas on happiness and failure, I have aimed to argue how *La fiesta* is a significant example of artistic failure that opens the door to alternative modes of living, knowing, but more importantly, dancing. Halberstam's notions of failure, forgetfulness, and stupidity have helped me to better portray performers' actions and practices within *La fiesta* in order to give specific examples of why I think failing in this performing arts show is an opportunity to reimagine flamenco dance and music.

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7. NOTES

I would like to thank Professor Paul Julian Smith and Professor Carlos Riobó for their feedback on preliminary versions of this article and Anthony J. Harb for his collaboration during the writing process. A slightly different version of this piece will be presented as part of the Master's degree en route requirements for the obtention of the title of Master of Arts in Spanish at City College of New York (CUNY).

- ¹ Mario Maya (1937-2008) was an influential Spanish flamenco dancer who performed internationally and contributed to the popularity of flamenco dance abroad. He was awarded the Premio Nacional de Danza in 1992 and founded the Centro Mario Maya in Seville in 1983 for the training of future generations of dancers.
- ² Pedro G. Romero (1955) is a multimedia artist mostly interested in the notion of archive and Spanish popular culture issues. He is the artistic director of the Israel Galván company and has intellectually contributed to all his shows.
- ³ For a detailed chronology of all Israel Galván's shows until 2011 as well as specific biographical information about the dancer which has informed this piece, see Navarro y Pablo.
- ⁴ Other authors have reflected on the relationships between Israel Galván's dancing and architecture. See, for example Ariza Parrado or Cano Ciborro.
- ⁵ For more information about the intersections between Israel Galván and butoh dance, see Canarim.
- ⁶ Niño de Elche (1985) is a Spanish musician and performer. Trained as a *cantaor*, Niño de Elche moved away from the traditional flamenco sphere and into contemporary practice. He combines his music recordings with performing arts collaborations with artists such as Angélica Lidell as well as participation in contemporary art shows such as Documenta 14 Kassel.
- ⁷ See, for example, his text *Estrella de los tiempos* (Didi- Huberman, 2008) or his lecture *Tierra y conmoción o el arte de la grieta*, available here: <http://www.pieflamenco.com/terra-y-conmocion-o-el-arte-de-la-grieta/> [Access: 08/12/19].
- ⁸ All translations into English from texts originally written in Spanish and French are my own.
- ⁹ Didi-Huberman has evoked elsewhere the relation between Israel Galván and the notion of immobility (Didi-Huberman, 2017, pág. 201.). Moreover,

in the documentary *Israel Galván, nacido bailando* (2019) recorded by Canal Sur in a series called *Hijos de Andalucía*, Galván mentions how his daughter tells him to stop dancing especially when he does not move. See the whole documentary here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ezUGPZ6l4k> [Access: 08/12/19].

- ¹⁰ Israel Galván states, «I have always dance by myself» in a report on *La fiesta* for the Spanish RTVE TV show *Atención obras* available here: <http://www.rtve.es/alacarta/videos/atencion-obras/atencion-obras-fiesta-israel-galvan/4088644/> [Access: 08/12/19].
- ¹¹ Israel Galván has stated on multiple occasions that he considers himself to be a musician. See, for example, how he explicitly addresses this issue in the documentary *Israel Galván, l'accent andalou* (Maria Reggiani, 2009) when rehearsing *Solo*.
- ¹² Vicente Escudero (1888-1980) was an influential Spanish dancer who participated in the avant-garde movements of his time. He performed internationally and crucially contributed to the worlds of flamenco and Spanish dance. In his book *Mi baile* he reflects on his long and successful career as a dancer.
- ¹³ *La curva* by Israel Galván was inspired by Vicente Escudero's experimental performing arts show at the Théâtre La Courbe in Paris premiered in 1924.
- ¹⁴ For more information on Escudero, see chapter two in Romero (2016). For explicit pieces on Escudero and Israel Galván see for example Romero Godoy (2016).
- ¹⁵ For a detailed explanation on Israel Galván's experimentation of the *faruca*, see his conversation with scholar José Luis Ortiz Nuevo presented by Universidad Internacional de Andalucía in the context of the seminar «El flamenco, un arte popular moderno» and available here: <https://vimeo.com/85158785> [Access: 08/12/19].
- ¹⁶ See for example his statements in a conversation with the audience during the premiere of *La fiesta* at the Festival d'Avignon and available here: <https://www.theatre-contemporain.net/video/La-Fiesta-dialogue-artistes-spectateurs-7le-Festival-d-Avignon?autostart> [Access: 08/12/19].
- ¹⁷ See, for example, his statements in the already mentioned documentary *Israel Galván, nacido bailando*: «After dancing as a kid with my parents; the professionalization, theatricalization, and academization with Mario Maya; and the competitions where I have to dance for a jury, I am given the opportunity to dance. Then I say to myself: 'I don't want to dance properly, I don't always have to dance properly.'»

- ¹⁸ Some reviews in this regard are the ones published on Culture Whisper on April 28, 2019 (https://www.culturewhisper.com/r/dance/israel_galvan_la_fiesta_sadlers/13232 [Access: 08/12/19]), on London Theatre on April 29, 2019 (<https://www.londontheatre1.com/reviews/dance/israel-galvans-la-fiesta-at-sadlers-wells-review/> [Access: 08/12/19]), and on Bachtrack on April 30, 2019 (https://bachtrack.com/es_ES/review-fiesta-israel-galvan-sadlers-wells-april-2019 [Access: 08/12/19] after the performances at London-based Sadler's Wells Theatre.
- ¹⁹ Statements included in the text «Es un círculo que se cierra» by Israel Galván are part of the press kit for the show *La fiesta*. I want to thank Pilar López of the Israel Galván Company for kindly providing me with this and other materials for this article.
- ²⁰ My analysis of *La fiesta* is informed by three live performances I attended –one at the Grec Festival in Barcelona in July 2017 and two at La Villette in Paris in June 2018– as well as the digital recording of the show at the Festival d'Avignon in July 2017. Moreover, most of the press materials and references to the show come from these performances as well as the ones at Teatros del Canal in Madrid in May 2018 and Sadler's Wells in London in April 2019.
- ²¹ Israel Galván conceives *La fiesta* as a versatile show subject to changes (<https://www.elperiodico.com/es/ocio-y-cultura/20170703/grec-2017-israel-galvan-estrena-la-fiesta-6144869> [Access: 08/12/19]). In fact, butoh dancer Minako Seki was present during the rehearsals but did not participate in the final show and the participation of the Byzantine vocal ensemble Polytropon was limited to the performances in Barcelona and Avignon in 2017. Other collaborators, such as Bobote, have not participated in all performances of the show.
- ²² For further explanations by Pedro G. Romero, see the already mentioned report on the TV show Atención obras available here: <http://www.rtve.es/alacarta/videos/atencion-obras/atencion-obras-fiesta-israel-galvan/4088644/> [Access: 08/12/19].
- ²³ For further references on *La fiesta*'s premiere, see the piece «Michael Jackson por Seguiriya: Israel Galván espanta al público austríaco» published by El Español on May 8, 2017: https://www.elespanol.com/cultura/musica/20170507/214228616_0.html [Access: 08/12/19].
- ²⁴ José Val del Omar (1904-1982) was an experimental Spanish filmmaker. Among his creations it is worth highlighting *Tríptico Elemental de España* including *Agua espejo Granadino*, *Fuego de Castilla*, and *Acariño Galaico*,

- ²⁵ Description included in a post uploaded by the official Facebook account of Israel Galván on June 16, 2017 in the context of the performances of *La fiesta* at Festival d'Avignon.
- ²⁶ See Sontag and Muñoz.
- ²⁷ «It [La fiesta] is probably my freest show», Israel Galván argues, in the piece published by El Diario de Sevilla on May 15, 2018 available here: https://www.diariodesevilla.es/ocio/baile-honesto-Israel-Galvan_0_1245475592.html [Access: 08/12/19]
- ²⁸ To know more: ELCHE, Niño de. *No comparto los postres*. Córdoba: Bandaàparte, 2016 and MARIBLANCA CORRALES, Pedro José. *Niño de Elche. El golpe que necesitábamos*. Madrid: Brumaria, 2019.
- ²⁹ During the conversation already mentioned between the artist and the audience in the frame of the Festival d'Avignon, a member of the audience explicitly addressed this issue and asked the artist about it. Galván confirmed her intuitions and expressed how dancing in a horizontal position taking advantage of the floor had driven the rehearsals of the show.
- ³⁰ See: https://www.lespanol.com/cultura/musica/20170507/214228616_0.html [Access: 08/12/19].