

Primeros Pasos  
Ballet Hispanico's Education Program

Excerpts from the Study Guide for

***¡VIVA LAS AMERICAS!***

Ballet Hispanico's Performance for Young People

Written by Lenore Gale, Ph. D.

This performance for young people is made up of pieces that are very closely based on traditional folkloric dances found in various regions of Latin America. However, these pieces have been choreographed by a professional choreographer familiar both with the folk traditions and with professional dance modes and techniques; and they are, of course, performed not by villagers but by trained professional dancers.

We have oriented this guide around two concerns: how do we "read" the language of dance? and what do these particular dances tell us about the peoples of Latin America?

This section includes, for each piece on the Ballet Hispanico program:

- 1) **WHAT TO LOOK FOR:** Suggested questions for your students to think about. You may wish to copy this page of each dance for your students to look at before the performance, and to complete immediately afterwards, while their impressions are fresh.
- 2) **THE CULTURAL CONTEXT:** Background material for the teacher, in which the "answers" are embedded.

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Tina Ramirez, Artistic Director

167 West 89<sup>th</sup> Street, NY, NY 10024 · 212-362-6710 · Fax 212-362-7809 · [www.balleshispanico.org](http://www.balleshispanico.org)

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**"LOS VIEJITOS"**  
Michoacán, Mexico

**WHAT TO LOOK FOR:**

- a. Where do you think this scene is taking place?
- b. Before the music starts, you will hear merchants hawking their wares in Spanish. Some words you will hear are:

frutero	fruit-seller
frutas frescas sabrosas	delicious fresh fruits
tortilla	Mexican flat bread
maíz	corn (used in tortillas)
granizado	shaved ice with fruit syrup
tamarindo	fruit flavors for granizado:
melocotón	tamarind, peach

- c. The name for this dance means "The Little Old Men." Do you think the dancers are really very old? What movements make them look old?
- d. What are the events that happen in this dance? Can you use words to tell the "story" of "Los Viejitos?"
- e. Why do you think people do this dance? (As a religious ritual? to communicate deep emotion? to have fun?) What makes it funny?
- f. What musical instruments do you hear?

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**"LOS VIEJITOS"**  
Michoacán, Mexico

**THE CULTURAL CONTEXT:**

"Los Viejitos" is probably the most popular dance of the State of Michoacán, which runs from the southwest coast to just west of Mexico City. The area of Michoacán where "Los Viejitos" is danced is one of mountains (including volcanoes), plateaus and lakes. It was the center of the Tarascan Indian civilization in pre-colonial times, and their descendants still populate the villages around Lake Pátzcuaro, where one is most likely to encounter this dance.

The dance is performed in villages where there is a strong sense of shared tradition and community (our scene is a village marketplace.) It is not regarded as making fun of old people (note that young and old dance together toward the end). But it is a dance that tells a story "just for fun." It always provokes great hilarity, partly because every village spectator knows that beneath their disguises (including elaborately made clay masks), the "real" dancers are strong young men; for the steps require muscular control, agility and endurance. Although very similar from town to town, the steps can vary with the artistry of the leader.

The "story line" concerns a group of old men who disrupt the market scene with their antics, show off their dance steps, corral the merchants and young girls into dancing with them, and briefly get into a spat among themselves, but end by dancing harmoniously with each other and with the village folk.

Since this highland region was not suited to plantation agriculture, it did not receive an infusion of African slaves. Thus the cultural influences on "Los Viejitos" are largely indigenous and Spanish. The dance movement characteristics of both cultures -- "single-unit" torso and stamping feet -- here coincide with the aim of the dance's "story" and the ironic imitation of the movements of old men.

The instrumental accompaniment reflects this dual heritage. Though the dance of "Los Viejitos" is said to antedate the arrival of the Spaniards, the native populations adopted the conquerors' stringed instruments heard here, violin and guitar, and used them to create their own original style.

Choreography: Anita Gonzalez

Music: Traditional

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**LA BOMBA**  
Puerto Rico

**WHAT TO LOOK FOR:**

- a. As you watch the dance, what clues can you find to the "mood"? Do the dancers seem sad or happy? Are their movements slow and languid, or rapid and high-energy?
  
- b. On what kind of occasion would you guess that people would dance the *bomba*? (ceremonial? religious? a party?)
  
- c. Does this dance tell a story? Can you say briefly what happens, and what characters or personalities are involved?
  
- d. Can you describe or imitate some of the main movements that you see the dancers making? What part(s) of their bodies is/are used the most?
  
- e. What musical accompaniment do you hear? Which seems more important, the melody or the rhythm?
  
- f. Can you tell what language is being spoken and sung?
  
- g. What role is played by prop and costume items, such as the men's white handkerchiefs and the women's skirts? Would the dance convey the same feeling without them?

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**LA BOMBA**  
Puerto Rico

**THE CULTURAL CONTEXT:**

The *bomba* is the Puerto Rican dance that most distinctively reflects the African influence on the island. It developed in coastal towns, where large communities of black workers grew up around the sugar-cane mills, and was never accepted in the more Europeanized echelons of society.

The exuberance of the dancers tells us that this is a happy social occasion. Indeed, in the village of Loíza Aldea (the only black town in Puerto Rico), the *bomba* is a highlight of the joyous annual July celebration. Every night during the week-long festival, often until dawn, the village comes under the spell of the pounding drums and the undulating movements of the dancers. People of all ages form a circle around two drummers. A solo dancer steps into the circle, greets the drummers, and begins, establishing the step and the rhythm that the musicians must follow. Different soloist, both men and women, take turns in the center, the drummers always matching their rhythms.

The dance takes its name from the drums, one large and one smaller, which are called *bombas*. One keeps to a basic repetitive rhythm, while the other improvises in response to the dancer's lead, creating complex cross-rhythms. *Bomba* instrumental accompaniment is purely percussive. Our last section features a *maraca* as well as the drums.

Aside from this percussive accompaniment, other characteristics also mark the *bomba's* African origins: articulated, "wavy" movements of shoulders, back and hips; rapid foot motion, with the feet often sliding along the ground; "call and response" singing; improvisatory nature of both dance steps and drumming; and the collective participation of dancers, singers, instrumentalists and spectators.

Our choreography joins three different *bombas* (you will hear the sections rhythmically demarcated) to tell a story of flirtatiousness and "showing off." The women look for Dolores, but she then dances with greater "abandon" (perhaps in a more "African" way) than they think proper -- though the men enjoy it!

The singing is in Spanish, the language brought to Puerto Rico by the *conquistadores*. In the first song, the women sing, "Where is Dolores? Let's dance, Dolores!" In the last, the lyrics are about "mi pañuelo blanco" -- my white handkerchief -- an important prop for the men. Another European contribution is the wide skirts. Traditionally, the women wear layers of colorfully trimmed petticoats which they flounce coquettishly.

Choreography: Anita González

Music: The Parilla Family;  
Raúl and Freddy González (Loíza Aldea);  
Batacumbele

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