



Ballet Hispanico at the Joyce, Program B

Saturday Apr 27, 2013 - By Steve Weinstein



If my EDGE review of Ballet Hispanico's Program A at the just-completed season at the Joyce was less than ecstatic, I had no such qualms when experiencing the sheer joy of "**Ballet Hispanico: Program B.**" The three separate works showed how profoundly this American troupe has spanned the wide world of Latino dance and distilled it to its essence.

Vanessa Valecillo and Jamal Rashann Callender in 'Tango Vitrola' (Source:Paula Lobo)

From the moment that a male soloist appeared on the stage, his arms clasped high over his head - those defiant gestures that define flamenco -- I was prepared to enter the world of flamenco.

Derived from several sources, over its long history, flamenco assimilated gypsy and folk dances, put it into the small neighborhood clubs of Andalusia and turned it into an art form. Normally, flamenco is accompanied by singer-shouters who rhythmically clap their hands in a quirky syncopation.

The last all-flamenco program I saw put too much emphasis on the singing, with the dancing appearing and re-appearing at intervals. This might be more authentic, but makes less of a pure dance experience.

Ballet Hispanico's "Nube Blanco" dispensed with traditional dialect singing in favor of a more dance-oriented score by Maria Dolores Pradera, all to the good. The audience was able to experience pure flamenco moves uninterrupted by long periods of singing and clapping.

The call-and-response between male and female dancers showed all of the classic flamenco poses, including just holding a pose. Or not: Flamenco is unique among world dance idioms in that standing still becomes as much a part of the dance as movement. The women wore these

fabulous flowing dresses ending in flounces. The men did their defiant aggressive foot stomping. But it was all in service to a coherent work that emphasized the foot-to-the-floor footwork that makes flamenco so gloriously earthbound.

"Tango Vitrola" lived up to its name perfectly. A male soloist, stripped to the waist but with the fedora so essential to the tango, dances by himself as scratchy tango music pours forth from an onstage old-fashioned hand-cranked Victrola.

Eventually, other men join him and dance with each other -- common in the tango. Not a gay thing at all, it's more of a macho challenge dance (even though one guy inevitably has to follow the lead).

Eventually, other men join him and dance with each other -- common in the tango. Not a gay thing at all, it's more of a macho challenge dance (even though one guy inevitably has to follow the lead). The women enter. Everyone floats through this most sensuous of dances.

Having been to Buenos Aires, I was able to witness how seriously Argentinians take their national dance. At the tango palace I visited, 80-year-old men float alongside couples in their 20s. Those only superficially acquainted with the tango, or who had their introductions through "Evita" (not the worst introduction) or through glitzy ballroom competitions and those TV dance-off shows (the worst introduction) will be amazed seeing how varied the moves are in the hands of a choreographer who understands its high artistic value while honoring its roots in dive bars of Buenos Aires.

Long disdained by the city's bourgeois elite, it only received the recognition it deserved when it traveled to Europe and the United States, where it became a popular craze. "Nube Blanco" manages to keep the overt, tactile eroticism while making a successful case (if one still needed to be made) as a serious art form.

Nothing, however, prepared me for the final work. "Danzon" is the national dance of Cuba; as such, it appropriates African dance and Caribbean styles like salsa, and as such, is popular throughout the region.

The dancing is simply breathtaking, with leaps, floor work and everything in between. But what elevated "Danzon" into another realm entirely was the live accompaniment from master clarinetist Paquito D'Rivera and his jazz ensemble.

D'Rivera is one of those artists who has such a mastery over his instrument that he becomes one with it. Think Louis Armstrong and his horn. When this elder statesman picked up his instrument, he flew to the skies. There was so much to love, but the height was when D'Rivera wandered onto the stage and just began chopping wood with a male dancer.

It was hard to believe that D’Rivera wasn’t riffing, with the dancer seemingly responding. To make a rehearsed piece look that spontaneous is the hardest feat in dance. These guys made it look effortless.

D’Rivera, his ensemble, and the dancers deserved every one of the enthusiastic whoops and hollers from the audience that greeted the finale. I hope this is revived, because this is one of those absolute works that must be seen live. No YouTube video can duplicate the experience.

"Ballet Hispanico" ran through Apr. 28 at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue at 19th. For information and tickets to upcoming shows, call 212-242-0800 or visit www.joyce.org

© 2013. EDGE Publications, Inc.