



BALLET HISPANICO TO SHOWCASE MICHELLE MANZANALES PREMIERE OF "CON BRAZOS ABIERTOS"

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The world of the choreographer is a personal one which says as much about the person behind the dance. For **Michelle Manzanales**, the current director of the **Ballet Hispanico School of Dance**, it will be her vision on display in "**Con Brazos Abiertos**" which will premiere on Tuesday April 18th at **The Joyce Theater**, along with two other sets, as an all-female choreographed show presented by the **Ballet Hispanico** announcing its 2017 season.

Texas, the Lone Star State. It's where a lot of the material for this piece derives from. The former republic that was once owned by Mexico and ultimately become a U.S. state, is the perfect example of a diverse yet split personality territory culturally. "Texas is complex. The history, what happened and what's happening today, it's all there and present. Like "Selena", you never quite fully fit into either and what is that?," Michelle Manzanales said.

In the city of Houston was where Michelle would enter the world, the daughter of first-generation immigrant parents who were indoctrinated in the ways of being a good citizen. "My mom's was a good student and didn't want to get a mark-down," Manzanales explained, "One of

the grades on her report card was for citizenship and part of it was not to speak other languages. It's a culture your growing up in and not even thinking about. The people who are forming you, its just sort of the way it is."

The irony of the title is that it implies an open-mindedness that Michelle did not share which is the premise and perhaps was an outcrop of those early experiences of forced denial of who she was. She followed her interests elsewhere and pursued the life of a dancer starting at a mere three years of age following in the footsteps of her older sister as she took formal dance lessons. Even then she had the mind of a dance creator. "My mom teases me that I was teaching my stuffed animals, giving them a dance class," Manzanales said.

Though there is a rich history of Latino ballet companies like the **Cuban Ballet Company** for example, the view of Latinos in dance tended to be limited. But when Michelle was introduced to **Eduardo Vilaro**, who owned a dance company in Chicago, **Luna Negra Dance Theater**, which for two short years took new approaches in it's production. She was sold. He is now the current CEO and Artistic Director of Ballet Hispanico who also created the choreography lab that leads the way for expressive dance makers, something he had always done.

This drew Michelle immediately as diversity was her diamond. She moved there in her early 30's cementing a very effective team for the next decade plus. "I was told that they were doing something different, innovative, expressing the contemporary Latino voice through dance." It brought much discussion as to why the company followed the accepted paths of their predecessors. "Why are we only that stereotype? Why are we limiting ourselves to the past? There's nothing wrong with all of those things, they brought us to where we are now. But people today have lots of things to say that go beyond that," Manzanales said.

Dancers have a short shelf life. By their thirties they begin to decline as their bodies, after years of physical punishment, start to break down. It's why many are drawn to be choreographers where they can bring their experience to bear on younger dancers but not have to tax themselves to the limits. "For me, I have always been a teacher and choreographer at heart," Manzanales said, "I always loved dancing for the way it would allow me to have a vehicle to express my feelings. Seeing dances in my head is what happens. If I'm reading a manuscript or an article I connect to, I also see dance," Manzanales said.

Michelle had not been working on pieces since she arrived at Ballet Hispanico. The stability and workload of her new position took her away from creating as she was on hiatus for six years from putting together works. But the time to do something like this finally materialized. "It felt like the right time to go back to focus that part of my brain again," Manzanales said, "Then the conversation started about developing "La Brazos Abiertos" into a fully realized work."

The process to creating a number is very much like an unfinished crossword puzzle, a lot of pieces but nothing recognizable. Michelle went to work introducing a variety of aspects to complement the dance sequences from music choices to the spoken word that would be formed and when all the pieces were connected, "Con Brazos Abiertos" was born. "The choreographer has many tools. There's brainstorming while your thinking about an idea. I do a lot of writing just

about different things I'm interested in, stream of consciousness writing," Manzanales pointed out, "I may look at other artists to inspire and in this one I collaborated with a Dominican-American poet, **Maria Bellini**, and we were talking about the project and she ended up writing seven different poems for the project.

Now armed with a narrative, the process continued with ideas formulated on paper that would have to be interpreted to the dancers. "Some of it is I get up, I hear the music, it makes me move a certain way, I repeat it, memorize it and take that material and teach it to the dancers," Manzanales said.

Improvisation and dialogue between teacher and performers often define where it will go. Looking for things that represent Mexican-Americans on a pop-level and mainstream status, comedy masters **Cheech and Chong** kept coming up, the duo where everything is useful and anything can happen was what she was going for. "I want the audience to be allowed to unplug and experience and connect and reflect with themselves. We don't do a lot of that these days. We're so busy looking at our phones and getting things done that we forget to live, just going through the motions," said Manzanales.

Music. It defines the direction. "Each piece of music was chosen really selectively from the inspiration of the content of the work." Manzanales said. Ranging from **Enrique Iglesias** to "**Rock En Espanol**" the exploration of living in a hybrid of cultures brings its corresponding stories to light.

But the dance is the method of communication here and the vessel that is used for audiences to ride the waves of this most diverse of oceans. "It's about what they are communicating with their physicality and beauty which is one component of what it really is that their doing," Manzanales said, "It's like a writer's pen. It's a great object, it has ink, it writes beautifully but what is it writing?. That's how I feel about dance."

This Tuesday evening three female choreographers will be highlighted and female dancers fill out the majority of the roster. But like other organizations, the power positions in management are still controlled by men. "It's interesting and that's what I appreciate and admire about Eduardo is I feel he has been breaking that down for a long time," Manzanales said, "Female donors working with artists like myself to bring pieces to the stage."

At Ballet Hispanico this has continued and because of that female-themed pieces will take center stage with Manzanales set alongside **Annabelle Lopez Ochoa** (Linea Recta) and **Tania Perez-Salas** (3. Catorce Dieciseis). "It's important giving the platform for these women to have the opportunity to put works on the stage," Manzanales said, "I feel honored to be a part of this surrounded by two incredibly talented women much more seasoned than me in this field." Manzanales admitted.

There is a photo of then-president **Barack Obama** posing with the cast of Ballet Hispanico on a memorable evening hung proudly in a meeting room. He represented if anything the importance of being the face of change. Ballet Hispanico programs represent this spirit taking it to places nationally and internationally and even brought her to her hometown of Houston.

What she saw in her class was like looking at her reflection in a mirror. This was her not so many years ago. "The arts are like a mediator allowing information to be shared with a new perspective," Manzanales. During post-show discussions the perspectives held are honesty displayed, not to hurt but as an opinion defined by previous conditioning. It's a useful starting point to re-define ourselves in a country that views us one-dimensionally. "It does change lives and perceptions, breaks stereotypes, it's like an epiphany is happening in that setting. It's not color. Its just great people doing what they love."

In December of 2016, Michelle Manzanales was named Director of Dance at Ballet Hispanico. "It's a huge responsibility. It's like bringing everything together. My main focus right now is to continue this legacy that we established here since 1970, always as a dance education organization. I am a choreographer and when I have something important to say I will say it," Manzanales closed out by stating as she returned to oversee the rehearsals.