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## **Ballet Hispanico: Between Two Cultures**

Sunday, April 23, 2017



**Ballet Hispanico**  
**The Joyce Theater**  
**New York, New York**

**April 20, 2017**

***Linea Recta, Con Brazos Abiertos, 3.Catorce Dieciseis***

**Jerry Hochman**

I had the opportunity to see Ballet Hispanico for the first time a year ago during its 2016 Joyce engagement, and was impressed not only by the company's repertoire and its dancers, but also by its spirit. Its program during this year's Joyce season ratifies, and cements, that opinion. The program is very good, as are its eclectic group of dancers, most of whom I recalled from last year's performances. And the spirit that permeates the performances in every piece makes the program even more memorable than it might otherwise be.

The company's artistic director, Eduardo Vilaro, trumpets that this Joyce program consists of creations by three female choreographers. While this might have been a novelty as recently as a year or two ago, it no longer is – which is a good thing indeed. Be that as it may, the indicia for evaluating the merits of a work of art include, among other more esoteric criteria, its craftsmanship and whether it resonates with an audience, regardless of the choreographer's gender. The pieces on this program succeed on both counts and more, and two of three – *Con Brazos Abiertos*, by Michelle Manzanales (assisted by artistic collaborator Ray Dones), and Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's *Linea Recta*, not only communicate a female point of view, but are glorious examples of dances that are interesting, coherently presented, and can invite audiences to join the experience. And one of them is all that, and also important.

Visualizing the immigrant experience in dance is not a new concept. Indeed, some may consider the subject unworthy of further choreographic development. *Con Brazos Abiertos* proves them wrong. The piece, which had its world premiere last month, is intelligently conceived and crafted, told in an unusual and captivating way, and compelling enough to make even someone with



Ballet Hispanico dancers in  
Tania Perez-Salas's "3.Catorce Dieciseis"  
Photo by Paula Lobo



Ballet Hispanico dancers  
in Michelle Manzanales's  
"Con Brazos Abiertos"  
Photo by Paula Lobo

no known Mexican blood feel the process and the pain. I'll comment on it further after a brief discussion of the other pieces on the program.



Ballet Hispanico dancers in  
Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's "Linea Recta"  
Photo by Paula Lobo

Lopez Ochoa has garnered quite a choreographic following in recent years, creating extensively for dance and ballet companies around the world, generally to critical, as well as public, acclaim. One of her most recent pieces, *Unframed*, which was commissioned by New York City Ballet and premiered last Fall, will be included in that company's "Here/Now Festival" this Spring.

*Linea Recta* is an "ambiance" piece based on Flamenco, but its significance is less for that than for applying the Flamenco style with a distinctly female sensibility and focus. And if you're thinking that there's no way that this profoundly masculine dance form (a description based on Flamenco routinely seen in this area), a hallmark of which is non-contact between genders and flaming testosterone, can be rebranded, think again.

In *Linea Recta*, the men, though vital components of the dance, are largely along for the ride: Flamenco's dramatic force is embodied in and provided by the women. From the beginning, the "predator" is the lead female dancer, Melissa Fernandez. Fernandez opens the dance with her back to the audience, nearly swallowed by an appropriately dominating red dress with an attached train that is the same red color, but textured like eyed peacock feathers. The train is used as a sensual prop to tease, taunt, entrap, and connect to the four men (Christopher Bloom, Mario Ismael Espinoza, Mark Geiringer, and Lyven Verdecia) who circle her as the piece proceeds. Fernandez dances *to* them (and the



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Photo by Paula Lobo

audience), not *for* them, with fire emanating from every pore and transmitted through her eyes like laser beams.

The choreography, to an original guitar composition by Eric Vaarzon Morel, weaves the basic Flamenco style into movement that is complex and unpredictable, and although the dominant color in the piece is red (the other women wear identical red dresses, without the train – or the lower half of the dress as the dance progresses; the men are bare-chested with red pants), the movement isn't similarly one-dimensional. And Lopez Ochoa quickly departs from the Flamenco norm, establishing that physical contact is an integral part of her Flamenco style. The contact isn't in any way salacious – that would be superfluous, but it's as powerful a connection as the body movement, based on Flamenco steps, inherently is.

As the piece evolves, it begins to look less *Carmen*-like, and more like a well-structured dance involving multiple pairings or groups, changing focus seamlessly from one to another. The most prominent of these pairings is that of Eila Valls (who initially dances solo) and Espinoza. Valls, relatively tall and willowy-looking (though not at all fragile), doesn't have Fernandez's intensity, but, in this piece and others, she conveys an overwhelming sensuality combined with a sense of cool aloofness and youthful inexperience. In his tenure as Artistic Director, Vilaro has led Ballet Hispanico in a more contemporary dance direction, evidenced by this program. Nevertheless, at least by appearance, Valls is the company ballerina. The other two very fine dancers in the piece were Shelby Colona and Diana Winfree.



Ballet Hispanico dancers in  
Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's "Linea Recta"  
Photo by Paula Lobo

According to the accompanying program notes, choreographer Tania Perez-Salas, who created *3.Catorce Dieciseis* in 2002 to an assortment of Baroque compositions, is here reflecting on "the circularity of movement through life" embodied in the unending number Pi, which, inexplicably, the title rounds off ( $3.\text{catorce dieciseis} = 3.1416$ ). Perez-Salas presents this through a series of relatively free-standing scenes that elaborate on the musical excerpts, and then fade away as if incapable of ending (or being rounded off).



Ballet Hispanico dancers in  
Tania Perez-Salas's "3.Catorce Dieciseis"  
Photo by Paula Lobo

As billed, the dance is a visual feast. The cornucopia of costumes (designed by Amanda Gladu) are often as alive and vibrant as the dancers, and Perez-Salas's choreography is a strangely interesting application of basically angular movement (which, like the number Pi, cannot be encapsulated in a single descriptive term) punctuated by occasional lyricism and lifts to the Baroque music. While I can't say I love it, its visual uniqueness on many levels make it work, and the audience embraced it with open arms.

*Con Brazos Abiertos* ("with open arms") visualizes the conflicts inherent in being a Mexican-American (implicitly a recent immigrant or the daughter of one) living in America – specifically, in Texas. Through skillful use of music, poetry, and sound bites, and through choreography and a performance that can sear the heart without being in any way melodramatic, Manzanales, who is the Director of the Ballet Hispanico School of Dance, visually relates how it feels to be caught between two cultures. It's a tale told gently (this dance is about cultural lures, not culture clash) with pathos, humor, nostalgia, compassion, and extraordinary intelligence and sensitivity – and, remarkably, without any sense of being teachy or preachy. She's just telling her story. And with little in the way of unnecessary visual embellishment and via a series of loosely connected scenes that vividly display the Mexican folkloric cultural lures and the intrusion of different cultural influences in the same "atmosphere" (including a knockout 'sombbrero dance'), that story stirs the soul. This is Manzanales's first choreographic effort for Ballet Hispanico (although she's created pieces previously, including for Chicago's Luna Negra, a company that Vilaro founded), and in case it's not already abundantly clear, I think it's fabulous.



Ballet Hispanico dancers in  
Tania Perez-Salas's "3.Catorce Dieciseis"  
Photo by Paula Lobo

And as I'll explain a few paragraphs below, it managed to get to me even before it started through a cross-cultural back-door.

The piece begins, curiously, with the dancers assembled on stage costumed in what resemble undergarments, with as much exposed bare skin as would keep it on the right side of being prurient. Doing so has a purpose – aside from instantly getting the audience to pay attention, Manzanales is telegraphing two things (at least): that the characters, at the outset, are as we all are at the beginning, empty slates upon which other factors deposit ambient cultural code; and also to universalize the ensuing experience: this dance isn't just about one girl's experience; it applies to everyone, of any gender, and of any culture.



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Photo by Paula Lobo

And the costumes (designed by Diana Ruettinger) become more elaborate and culturally representative as the piece progresses.

Eventually, this opening scene, and each scene thereafter, ends or begins with the light focused on one dancer: Winfree. Everything revolves around, and impacts, her. Which isn't to say that the other dancers are irrelevant, just that she's the embodiment of the storyteller: an empty vessel to be filled with influences from her primary identity culture, Mexican, and the prevailing American culture that she is exposed to each day. And the story, and the conflict, that is reflected in the action on stage is peppered and propelled by the musical "soundscape" (what a wonderfully appropriate word) that Manzanales curated, which runs the gamut from Julio Iglesias to Cheech & Chong; from "rock *en español*" to the potent poetry of Maria Billini-Padilla. This cultural lure is impossible to resist...almost.

Eventually, Winfree is "connected" with one of the male dancers: Verdecia. I'm not quite sure whether Verdecia is supposed to be someone from Winfree's character's Mexican-American neighborhood, or a representative of the surrounding culture that she's trying to understand (and that he is as well, from the other direction). The former would only be a further universalization of the experience along gender lines, and Manzanales doesn't need to do that. So I think the latter explanation more likely reflects Manzanales's intent, particularly since there isn't much action here, it's primarily a mutual sizing up; but there's no doubt that at some level there is an emotional connection that may or may not develop notwithstanding the significant cultural differences between them. It's not critical to an understanding or appreciation of the piece, but it makes sense.



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And it ties into that cultural back-door I mentioned.

As is evident throughout this piece, Manzanales knows that the cultural influences that most of us grow up with are prisms and filters that have a profound impact on our senses, memories, and ultimately our lives, and they're a connection to one's heart and mind that she doesn't hesitate to brilliantly exploit. So it's no accident that as the lights started to dim before the dance began one could hear piped through the theater's speakers the sound of the Marty Robbins song, *El Paso*. To some in the audience maybe it was background noise (many seemed not to be paying attention), but it's a song I grew up with and loved before I was old enough to know exactly why, so I listened, and smiled, and became immediately transported to another place and time. I hadn't heard, or thought of, that song in years. Decades. Now, like Manzanales's story, I can't get it out of my head.

But beyond my personal connection, the song relates the “between two cultures” subject from the point of view of the American being exposed to the Mexican culture, and speaks to the natural assimilation of each, with both influences being channeled and maintained to their mutual benefit that *Con Brazos Abiertos* hints at (despite the constant musical lure of “Mexico, Mexico...” as the piece ends) without in any way “playing” to the issue: Robbins’s love for his Mexican

maiden merely establishes, as both an enigma and a simple statement of fact, that for purposes of being a member of the human family, including falling in love, cultural background matters, and at the same time doesn’t matter at all. And to further validate the process (notwithstanding the “South-West Side Story” theme endemic to the song), my understanding is that the Mexican girl that the song’s protagonist fell in love with, “Faleena,” was inspired by a girl with whom Robbins attended school — in the fifth grade. Without outside interference, the process, however strong the cultural lures and however painful it may be, works.

If Ballet Hispanico is ever invited to perform at the White House, *Con Brazos Abiertos*, and the song that introduces it, must be included on the program.



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