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Ballet Hispánico Ascends New Heights; Dance Review

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PAULA LOBO

Ballet Hispánico in Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's *Línea Recta*

A multi-everything audience tucked into the closing matinee performance of Ballet Hispánico's 2017 Season at The Joyce this afternoon. Pleasingly, the audacious new programming set forth by artistic director Eduardo Vilaro matched the diversity seated around me. Never say that this man does anything by half measures: not only has he addressed the dearth of representation from female choreographers by selecting work from all Latina dance-makers, but he has also chosen stories that go beyond the typical "Spanish" flair. A year ago, I [chided](#) the company's leadership for its focus on work that too narrowly interpreted what it means to be "Latin". How fantastic then to come away refreshed and challenged by what I saw this afternoon.



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A red dress sails around the dazzling Shelby Colona who exudes the mystique of Balanchine's "unknowable women". She is a flamenco dancer flanked by four studly men in Annabelle Lopez Ocho's *Línea Recta*, a scrumptious dance that entangles and enfolds its dancers amongst one another without ever devolving into mindless gymnastic manipulations. Suddenly Ms. Colona is gone, replaced by the silky smooth Eila Vallis, who looks as if she is cooing with her every gesture. It is intoxicating to behold. There is a charge that surges through these bodies as they lift and fold around each other like origami figurines before breaking apart to form a constellation of images - most notably: the bull, scorpion, matador, and the dominating flamenco dancer. What is most marvelous about it all is that these dancers care more about their relationships with one another than they do about the audience. We are simply here to observe their beauty, and by Jove are they stunners. The men charge, the women stomp, a series of ever-changing crest like insignias are projected, and out of the blue a line of bodies is staring us down in a corridor of light before turning upstage to walk into the blackout. Darned if I know what it all means, but I could watch it over and over again, world without end.



PAULA LOBO
Ballet Hispánico in Michelle Manzanales' *Con Brazos Abiertos*

There is something decidedly frustrating about Michelle Manzanales' *Con Brazos Abiertos*, which is part of its charm. In a commissioned debut for the company, Manzanlaes tackles the issue of being caught between cultures while paying homage to iconic symbols she was reluctant to embrace as a child. A Cheech & Chong voice-over hilariously spells it all out: "We gotta be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans, both at the same time. It's exhausting."



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Ballet Hispánico in Michelle Manzanales' *Con Brazos Abiertos*

While beautifully setting a familiar tone, certain proceedings threatened to become exactly that: exhausting. The pay off for sticking with this rumination on the "Identity Mambo" was a heart-stopping dance between Diana Winfree and Lyvan Verdecia that explored all the awkward stops and starts between two people who for all intents and purposes are the same, but who look so differently from each that they essentially belong to two different worlds. Set to Daniela Andrade's cover of Radiohead's [Creep](#), and coming out of a series of boisterous scenarios, this pas de deux wonderfully illustrated the desire to blend in and the fear of being found out. Interestingly *Brazo's* lead dancer, Ms. Winfree, "looks" like she could be a Gringa, and maybe she is, but her yearning to belong to her community was something that anyone could understand, especially a Mexican living in this country at this time. The final moment, following an allusion to the "Wade in The Water" sequence from Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*, deserved every ounce of uproarious applause that it received.



PAULA LOBO
Ballet Hispánico in Tania Pérez-Salas' 3. *Catorce Dieciséis*

Less successful was the company premiere of Tania Pérez-Salas' 3. *Catorce Dieciséis*. Though filled with wonderful dance moments that showed the dancers off well, this contemporary dance piece seemed to be reaching for a meaning that it could not possibly achieve. I fault the grave religious feeling imparted by the music. While I applaud Pérez-Salas for crafting a work that did not attempt to strictly interpret the music, this movement for movement's sake of a dance was ultimately defeated by the strong message being imparted by what we heard. What I took away from *Catorce* was an awe for the fantastic mix of choreographic devices - canon, unison, variation upon a theme, and endless overlay - that Pérez-Salas built into a powerful trio for three women. Here was a choreographic statement filled with possibilities, especially as interpreted by the dancers Jenna Marie - who moves and looks like a young Linda Celeste-Sims from the Ailey company - Shelby Colona, and Eila Valls. I wish that this moment had been the guiding force for all of *Catorce*.



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Mr. Vilaro has found a new identity for Ballet Hispánico, something that is exciting and intriguing to watch. Already his new dancers, including the lovely Zui Gomez, look as if they have been performing together for many years. The company's senior men, the ferocious Chris Bloom - who seems to stop time as he transitions seamlessly through sequences - and the stunning Mr. Verdecia are on their ways to becoming stars. Coupled with the glamour of Ms. Colona and Ms. Marie, we are witnessing the beginning of a new era. Be sure to see where the company goes next.

For more information about Ballet Hispánico, visit: ballethispanico.com

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