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Ballet Hispanico Examines Dance and Politics

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Ballet Hispanico's New York run at the Joyce Theater was a success, examining politics through dance.

Exuding Latin American pride and a wealth of artistry, athleticism and heritage, Ballet Hispanico made its celebrated return to New York City last Tuesday, April 18 at the Joyce Theater. Under the direction of Eduardo Vilaro, the company presented a triple bill of transcendent works by female choreographers that paid tribute to what it means to be both a dancer and citizen of color in today's America.

The first ballet, "Linea Recta," featured choreography from acclaimed choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa.

The curtain opened to dancer Melissa Fernandez center stage, displaying braceo — Flamenco arm work — in traditional traje de flamenca. As classical Spanish guitars sounded, four suitors approached Fernandez from opposite wings, alluding to Balanchine's "Rubies" tableau in "Jewels."

"Linea Recta" was marked by multiple pas de deux and pas de trois, encompassing a multitude of innovative choreographic feats. Most notably, Fernandez was lifted high above the stage, reaching a full 180-degree split before safely returning to her partner's embrace.



The Latin American ballet company, Ballet Hispanico, returned to New York City on April 18 to perform a culturally rich and innovative triple bill.

A noteworthy moment in Ochoa's choreography featured four men — Christopher Bloom, Mario Ismael Espinoza, Mark Gleringer and Lyvan Verdecia — arm in arm and dancing in unison as if fusing "Swan Lake's" "Dance of the Cygnets" with "Don Quixote's" "Basilio."

"Linea's" final image featured the company downstage in a chorus line, dancing toward the audience. As the curtain closed, the dancers' silhouettes were seen walking hand-in-hand upstage against a blinding backdrop.

The show continued with the world premiere of "Con Brazos Abiertos." Michelle Manzanales' powerful choreography held Trump's anti-immigrant, anti-Mexican rhetoric accountable through powerful audio and visuals.

Cheech & Chong's satirical "Mexican American Song" comically opened the next dance. The whole company stormed the stage, resembling matadors in their exaggerated sombreros and taleguillas as mariachi music blared. The dancers' authentic camaraderie and onstage chants paid homage to the Latin American community's solidarity during bouts of systemic oppression.

During a brief interlude provocative words played from a loudspeaker: "Nobody knows how tough it is to be a Mexican-American. We gotta be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans, both at the same time."

As the words faded, a telling pas de deux ensued, ending with a female dancer pounding profusely against her male partner's chest, a clever and emotional call to President Trump's proposed border wall, while an overhead voice uttered the words "I do not belong here."

"Con Brazos Abiertos" ended joyously as the company danced vigorously to a voice chanting "This is Mexico," a mantra that demonstrated the company's opposition to prejudice and xenophobia.

Tania Perez-Salas choreographed the evening's third and final ballet, "Catorce Dieciseis." Departing from the motif of cohesive movement seen throughout the evening, "Catorce" showcased more individualized and somewhat improvised dance, highlighted by the incoherent lighting of Bob Franklin.

In the evening's program, director Eduardo Vilaro wrote, "Our program tonight builds on our commitment to serve the marginalized, strengthen our artistic leaders, and add a cultural perspective that is honest and grounded." Ballet Hispanico accomplished just that.

Ballet Hispanico's New York season ran at the Joyce Theater April 18 through April 23.

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