



Review: Ballet Hispánico Sizzles at the Luckman Fine Arts Complex

Thursday, February, 2017- By Humberto Capiro



A scene from “Danzón,” part of Ballet Hispánico’s performance at Luckman Fine Arts Complex

Back in mid-2009, I had the great pleasure to attend my first performance of Ballet Hispánico at the Ahmanson Theatre as part of the series *Glorya Kaufman presents Dance at the Music Center* under director of programming for the Music Center, Renae Williams. At that time, the company, founded in 1970, was headed by its longtime creator and artistic director, Tina Ramirez, who was born in Venezuela to a Puerto Rican mother and Mexican father.

As the leading Latino dance company in the United States, Ballet Hispánico focuses on showcasing works by Latino choreographers with its mission to “explore, preserve, and celebrate Latino cultures through dance. It was announced earlier that year that Cuban-American dancer/choreographer Eduardo Vilaro, who founded his own dance company, Luna Negra Dance Theater in Chicago, would take the reins of the company from Ramirez, whom I was able to meet and greet that evening.

Fast forward to Thursday, Feb. 16 at the Luckman Fine Arts Complex located at Cal State Los Angeles where Ballet Hispánico came back to delight my senses. This time, with Vilaro fully in command.

The first piece of the evening was “Flabbergast” (2001) choreographed by Spanish-born Gustavo Ramírez Sansano (who also designed the costumes) with music by Juan García Esquivel and lighting by Joshua Preston. A very urban piece, which started with several segments of spoken words, it featured the company in different groupings and vignettes dressed in casual attire carrying suitcases at times, alluding to the idea of being in a new city as an immigrant. The choreography was quirky and fun as the recorded music by Esquivel moved from smooth jazz to the very sexy, humorous “Mucha Muchacha” cha cha cha segment that highlighted the battle of the sexes in Latin culture.

Second on the bill was the very passionate and visually striking “Linea Recta” (2016) from Belgian-Colombian choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa with gorgeous recorded Spanish guitar and percussion music by Eric Vaarzon Morel and fiery red costumes by Danielle Truss with complementing lighting design by Michael Mazzola. Things began with a lone female dancer onstage sporting a sexy, abstract flamenco red dress with a long, narrow tail and with her back to the audience. She was joined by four of the male dancers wearing matching red pants and no shirts whom she partnered with in sensual interactions.

The choreography by Lopez Ochoa mixed traditional ballet and modern dance moves with flamenco mannerisms to convey a hybrid that at times was abstract but in many ways traditional. The larger and faster ensemble segment towards the end of the piece was specifically engrossing as all eight dancers performed a complex series of circular formatted patterns that brought thunderous applause from the audience. Special kudos to my Cuban paisano, dancers Lyvan Vendecia and Melissa Fernandez for their exceptional athleticism and elegant body lines. To close off the evening on a high note was “Danzón” (2009) by choreographer and director Vilaro with recorded music by multiple composers and performers including the late Dizzy Gillespie and Cuban master saxophonist, clarinetist Paquito D’Rivera. Although named for the slow and intimate Cuban dance genre of the danzon, the piece began with the ensemble dancing a fast, complex series of sensual moves to a choreography by Vilaro that is ballet mixed with what we call salsa dancing today.

The dancers showed exceptional timing and coordination with special attention to the beautiful leg extension and arm positions by the female members. The middle segment showcased the more traditional sound of the sensuous danzon with another excellent performance by Vendecia and Fernandez. The energetic final segment featured the company onstage with a disco ball-filled ceiling that reminded old school social dancers of the heydays of disco and salsa of the 1970s.

The piece ended with a masterful afro-Cuban solo by Vendecia with bata percussion that showed his strength as a dancer, as well as the Cuban roots of this music.

Judging from the enthusiastic and thunderous applause by the near-capacity audience, it seems that a yearly presentation by Ballet Hispanico is warranted in the city of Los Angeles. After all,

this city holds the largest population of Latinos in the United States, and our culture needs to be showcased with artists such as these.

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