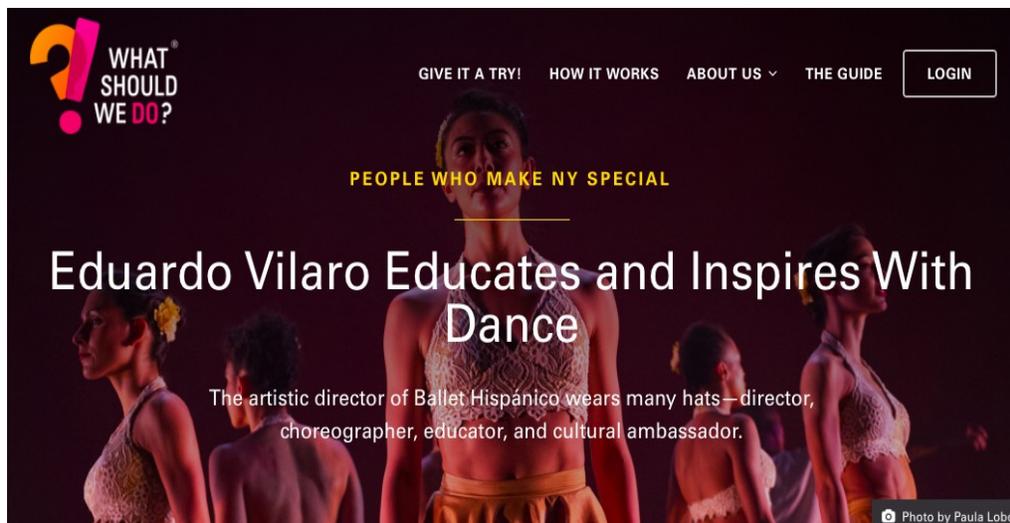




# Eduardo Vilaro Educates and Inspires with Dance

April 10, 2018 – Hilary Sterne



When Eduardo Vilaro, the artistic director and CEO of Ballet Hispánico, greets us outside of his cozy office on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, he’s filling a large mug with coffee. “Sorry!

Can I get you anything? This is the first of many I need to get me through the day!” he says with a laugh.

It’s hard to believe someone as naturally ebullient—and who looks a good two decades younger than his 54 years—relies on a never-ending dose of daily caffeine. But with the debut of his dance company’s New York season and the world premiere of two new works at the Joyce Theater just days away, Vilaro is excused for needing the energy boost. Lucky for us, he had a

few minutes to chat about the past, present, and future—his own and that of the company—and his love of New York.

**What Should We Do?!**: Let me start by asking you about your background. Your family immigrated here from Cuba in the 1960s, correct?

**Eduardo Vilaro**: Yes. We left Cuba after my father was incarcerated during the Castro regime. We had the opportunity to come to America in 1969 when I was 6 years old. We had family in New York City, so we came straight here.

**WSWD**: How did you become involved with dance? I hear it had something to do with Linus van Pelt?

**Vilaro**: [Laughs] Yes. What connected me to my culture, growing up in the Bronx, was music and dancing. At family gatherings and parties, there would be Latin music playing, and there was always dancing. But it wasn't until I was in the eighth grade that I really fell in love with performing. I played the role of Linus in my school's production of *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, and I was told to improvise a dance with my blanket. From that moment on, I was hooked. I discovered the thrill of performing in front of an audience.

In high school, I began studying a Brazilian martial arts form called capoeira, which is really a mixture of dance and martial arts. I loved it, but I always found myself sneaking into the ballet class that was taught in the studio next door; so eventually I started taking classes. I went to a Catholic prep school, Fordham Prep, and my parents dreamed of my becoming a professional—just not a professional dancer! But I was able to earn a dance scholarship to Adelphi University and study with some incredible teachers there.

**WSWD**: So how did your association with Ballet Hispánico start?

**Vilaro**: Well, I auditioned for the Alvin Ailey summer program while I was in college and got accepted. When that was finished, I studied at the Martha Graham School [of Contemporary Dance]. So I was taking chances going to different schools of dance.

One day I decided to take a class at Ballet Hispánico. Tina Ramírez [the company's founder] watched the class, and afterward she said, "I have one spot open in the company for a male dancer. Are you interested?" I was like, "Yes!" That day led me to 10 years as a dancer with the company, as well as working with our arts education and community outreach program.

**WSWD**: Tell me a little bit about that program.

**Vilaro**: Our Community Arts Partnership program brings Latino dance and culture to schools, community centers, college campuses, and other public venues across the country. We offer in-school and after-school workshops and master classes to students in public schools in New York City. In our School of Dance, 700 kids from 2 to 16 years old participate in our training program. But the Community Arts Partnership Program is a way to reach out to communities that are underserved and to bring possibilities to those who may never have dreamed about or even seen dance as an art. It really is a transformative experience.

From the time I started working with Tina in arts education, I just felt so connected to young people. You see them grow and start to develop an aesthetic and you're like: Wow! This is what it's about. As an arts leader, it really shaped and molded me.

**WSWD:** How have you changed the repertoire and the mission of Ballet Hispánico since you became artistic director?

**Vilaro:** I try to revere the past but bring a different context to it that is relevant to today. I avoid the stereotype traps and work not to pigeonhole our culture; that only serves to limit our ability to communicate with each other. I am trying to develop an aesthetic that allows the choreographer to add to the cultural dialogue with her or his voice. We need to present work that helps us talk about who we are, that looks at the culture of the Hispanic and Latino diaspora. We need to hear voices that represent diversity. I am interested in what about our culture both separates and connects us.

**WSWD:** How would you describe your work in just a couple of words?

**Vilaro:** Oh, boy! That's hard. It really depends on the work I am creating and the collaboration. What I try to do in my work is to tell stories of my culture through the language of dance—about extraction, oppression, about the diaspora, about moments of passage. Whether that's about quinceañeras or the story of the Jewish influence on Spain's history. As a choreographer, I find inspiration everywhere. I guess if I had to sum it up, I would say passionate, athletic—contemporary movement fused with Latino love.

**WSWD:** Tell me a bit about the upcoming New York season.

**Vilaro:** We're very excited to be debuting two world premieres, both inspired by the poet Federico García Lorca. The first, *Espíritus Gemelos*, choreographed by Gustavo Ramirez Sansano, reflects on the relationship between Lorca and artist Salvador Dalí. It was a rather tortuous but loving relationship based on mutual admiration. The second is *Waiting for Pepe*, by Carlos Pons Guerra, which is inspired by Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* and explores themes of sexuality, oppression, and yearning for freedom. Also on the program is a work by choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, which is just this glorious celebration of flamenco dance within a contemporary twist, as well as a repeat of last year's stunner *Con Brasos Abiertos*.

**WSWD:** Do you see a cultural and political significance to what you are doing in this moment we are currently living in?

**Vilaro:** Absolutely. Dance can be a vehicle to open dialogue and answer a lot of the questions that are being asked today, questions about female leadership, about diversity, about cultural leadership. All it needs is a platform, which is the stage. If you give people the right tools to have that dialogue, then at least you can have a conversation. Dance is a language that brings us together, that overcomes the barriers of social construct. Dance is language based on who we are and how we communicate with movement or gesture. Even if we can't understand each other's verbal language, we can understand movement and the images it brings.

All of the arts are under attack right now. The importance of diversity, of other voices, has never been more important. I truly believe that the arts and dance, in particular, provide a language of collaboration. The struggle is real, but we in the arts can lead the way.

**Rapid Round!**

Eduardo Vilaro's Faves...in a NY Minute

**Restaurant?**

King. It's a little jewel—unpretentious but elegant and serves the best Italian food. Plus, it's right near my favorite place to hear music, City Winery.

**Way to spend the day?**

With my son, Max—Maximiliano—who is 10. We'd go grab a bagel somewhere and then just romp around wherever the day takes us—a movie, a burger joint. We'd probably head to Central Park and kick a soccer ball around. And then we'd end the day at Max's favorite place: the Nike store!

**Ballet?**

If I had to choose just one it would be Swan Lake. Oh, my God! The passion! The drama! The heartbreak! That's the ballet that made me fall in love with ballet.

**Season in New York?**

Spring; there's just something so magical and unexpected about trees blooming in the city.

**Oasis in the city?**

The Cloisters.

**Food truck?**

I'm old school—any halal truck will do!