



## **Ballet Hispánico Mounts Skillful Depictions of Struggle and Resiliency**

April 11, 2018 – Brittney Feit



Ballet Hispánico has been a gem of the New York dance scene for years, and, in their season premiere at the Joyce Theater last night, the company proved as strong as ever. Artistic Director Eduardo Vilaro gives his troupe of thirteen dancers opportunities to work with choreographers from around the world, producing contemporary works of bold technique that illuminate concerns of Latino/a identity and resiliency.

The program begins with a crowd favorite, *Línea Recta* (2016), by in-demand choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa. Here, the iconic edge of ruffles on flamenco skirts, manipulated by a dancer's circular leg motions, is extended into a dramatic train of only ruffles, worn by Melissa Fernandez. The extended skirt allows Fernandez to bite, toss, and wrap herself in the dramatic costume before four men, shirtless in red pants, rush in to lift and manipulate her. As the dance expands, the entire cast of eight sensually circle their wrists and stomp to a beautiful recording of flamenco guitarist Eric Vaarzon Morel. Later, female dancers with much shorter ruffled skirts move between traditionally strong curved arms and wide, deep lunges with legs apart as their ballet slippers take root on the ground. *Línea Recta* explores how a hybridization of traditional

and contemporary steps allows for more physical contact between dancers than textbook flamenco would typically allow. It also shows the versatility of the dancers as they move adeptly between balletic and flamenco dance steps. Danielle Truss's costumes certainly play a large roll in articulating such themes.

Waiting for Pepe, by Carlos Pons Guerra, is one of two world premieres, performed by the entire company. The dancers appear to struggle in the dark as they touch their own bodies, wearing Keds and dresses or pants in shades of gray. Blaring horns give the scene an unnerving vibe, and the stage lights shine intermittently to reveal dancers straightening up and carrying themselves with obedient body language: chin held high, hands held together. Yet as soon as the lights lower, the collective suffers again, slithering and melting to the floor as they clutch their faces. The program notes that Guerra was inspired by Federico García Lorca's 1936 play, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, as well as the theatricality of Latin films and telenovelas. The high-voltage romantic intrigue of the latter is perhaps gestured at in a scene where dancers yelp and scream at one another, only to come together amicably for fluid duets. (Lorca's play had guided Guerra through a painful childhood where his homosexuality was not accepted by Spanish society.) The other world premiere on the bill is *Espiritus Gemelos*, by Spanish choreographer Gustavo Ramírez Sansano, who examines the oft-questioned relationship between Lorca and Salvador Dalí (portrayed by Chris Bloom and Omar Román de Jesús). The intimate friendship, first formed in 1923, unfolds before us, accompanied by an enchanting piano score by Manuel de Falla and Jacinto Guerrero. In an environment populated by just a few props (Lorca's bed, Dalí's easel and canvas), the two dancers move with measured grace, hyper-aware of their actions and attractions toward each other, palpably charging the air. As the artists become more comfortable together, they exchange their plainclothes for all-white costumes suggesting innocence, as they guide and direct each other's steps to become one enmeshed entity of creativity and desire.

Finally, Michelle Manzanales's *Con Brazos Abiertos* centers on the complexities of Mexican-American identity and features one woman's personal struggle in embracing it. The company leaps and swivels joyously with sombreros tilted down over their faces in front of a pale orange backdrop, followed by Melissa Fernandez's unmatched solo work on an intimately dim stage. She balances her sombrero on her foot and watches it with wonder, only to kick it softly in the air where it falls heavy on her chest, bringing her body gently to the ground. Her subsequent interaction with a male dancer gives her an outlet for her frustration as she punches his chest one moment and embraces him the next. A version of Radiohead's "Creep," by Swedish trio Ember Island, fittingly accompanies her fight to belong and be heard. She, and the rest of the company, conclude by sweeping their billowing white skirts across the stage. This gorgeous flowing spectacle could only be matched by Fernandez's piercing eyes, confidently staring ahead as the curtain comes down on another powerful performance.