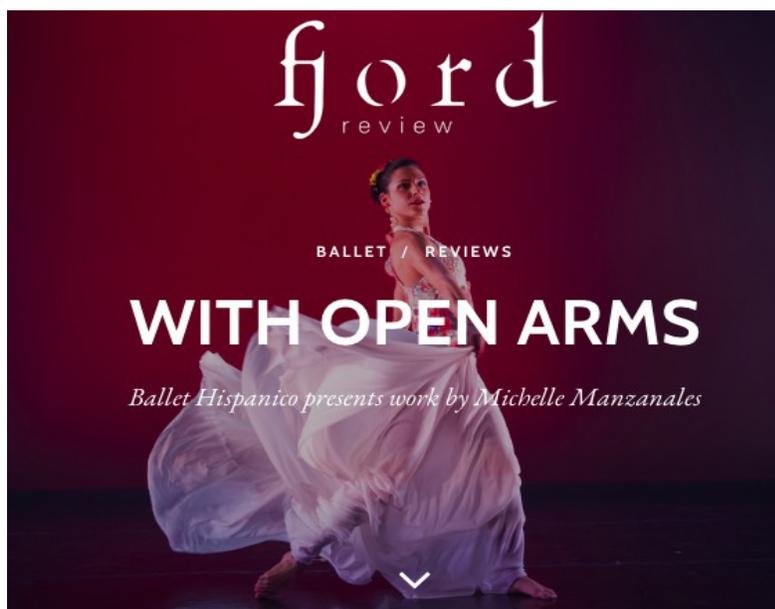




WITH OPEN ARMS

August 31, 2018 – Rebecca Ritzel



Mixed Bill
Ballet Hispanico
Mt. Gretna Playhouse, Mount
Gretna, Pennsylvania, August 11,
2018

Of all the touring modern dance companies based New York, none has consistently introduced talented new choreographers (or new-to-me choreographers) like Ballet Hispanico.

I realized that this summer after two notable occasions: After sitting in the audience at Gretna Music, where company's final summer performance led off with Michelle Manzanales's 2017 dream-like suite "Con Brazos

Abiertos;" and after learning that Broadway producer Scott Rudin has tapped Belgian avant-garde choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker to choreograph a new production of the musical "West Side Story."

De Keersmaeker for "West Side Story"? Seriously? I know Jerry Robbins wasn't exactly Puerto Rican, but does Rudin not know how many amazing strong choreographers of Iberian descent are working North America?

That's when it hit me: I know how plentiful these choreographers are because I've been introduced to them by Ballet Hispanico, and Luna Negra, the late-great Chicago troupe run by Eduardo Vilaro, Ballet Hispanico's current artistic director and an top-notch choreographer in his own right.

It was on a 2010 Luna Negra program that I first experienced Belgian-Colombian choreographer Annabelle Lopez-Ochoa, whose work I've since seen danced by half a dozen ballet companies. In 2012, Ballet Hispanico debuted its first all-Cuban program, featuring a new piece by Vilaro and introducing me to Pedro Ruiz.



They weren't the first company I saw dance works by the darkly innovative Spaniard Cayetano Soto, but they were the second. I haven't seen them perform a piece by Rosie Herrera, but the Miami-based modern dance star is also represented in Ballet Hispanico's repertoire.

So I was very curious when I saw I'd have a chance to catch the end of the company's summer tour, and dance created by Manzanales, a former Luna Negra dancer who now runs the school at Ballet Hispanico.

Another Latinx choreographer? Sí, por favor. Especially in Mount Gretna, a Chautauqua community founded near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, more than a century ago, where once a year a modern dance troupe comes to perform in a rustic amphitheater.

Ballet Hispanico has plenty of uptempo Latin medley dances, including one honoring Celia Cruz and another, "Danzon," that closed out the Gretna program with the music of Paquito D'Rivera. Vilaro originally created this suite for Luna Negra, to be performed live with D'Rivera and the Turtle Island String Quartet. The company has also performed the score with a live dance hall band. This was my first time seeing the steamy choreography performed with only recorded music, and the effect was a bit deflating, particularly in a long scat section where a male dancer shimmies to D'Rivera's clarinet. (Live, onstage, that original moment was spectacular.) But the closing extended arrangement of Dizzy Gillespie's "Night in Tunisia" added brass fanfares to close out "Danzon," and firepower solos from the company.

Lopez-Ochoa was represented on this program by "Linea Recta," a clever dance set to flamenco music for a female soloist, four guys to fawn over her and a long, red ruffled train for a skirt. Lopez-Ochoa likes to play around with her props and costumes—think of her "Sombreisimo" where guys toss hats around—and "Linea Recta," follows in a similar vein: the female soloist drags around guys who stand on her skirt, and they take turns winding her up like thread around a spool.

It's cute, but it's also a gimmicky. The challenge Lopez-Ochoa has set up for herself is sustaining a barefoot dance to music meant for percussive flamenco tapping. By the time four corps dancers join the quintet onstage and everyone starts slapping their thighs, the "Linea Recta" starts to feel less like an original idea and more like a parody.

Not so for “Con Brazos Abiertos.” “With Open Arms,” as the title translates, is a suite set to everything from Cheech and Chong comedy tracks to Radiohead covers. Manzanales is exploring Mexican American identity, but not broadly and esoterically, rather, she is selling us the story of a teenage girl torn between two cultures.

This ground-breaking piece premiered at the Joyce Theater last year. It’s a brilliant depiction of life in the land of red, white and blue from the perspective of a girl dreaming in the colors of a brilliant pink, green and purple fiesta.



“Being Mexican American is tough,” a voiceover lifted from the 1997 biopic *Selena* says over the music at the start of the work. “We gotta know about John Wayne and Pedro Infante. We gotta know about Frank Sinatra and Agustín Lara. We gotta know about Oprah and Cristina.” That pop-culture push-pull is depicted literally onstage, as dancers with their faces obscured by giant sombreros jerk each other around and engage in something that resembles a creepy gym-class line dance, hats tipping up and down in unison. (The spot-on costume design is by Diana Reittiger, Ballet Hispanico’s in-house wardrobe manager.)

Did Manzanales ever feel stereotyped as a kid? She must have, but she must also have imagined her ancestral homeland as a problem-free place of great beauty, just as Rosalia sings of Puerto Rico as an island paradise in “*West Side Story*.” “Con Brazos Abiertos” includes a reverie where the dancers are clothed in wide white skirts with bright bands of flowers at their waists. They’re as alluring as a tourism commercial. As they lift the yards of fabric and swirl, a young female dancer (Dandara Veiga) strides forward as if in a daze. She’s Manzanales, it seems, and though this Veiga stoically observes some scenes, she’s fully engaged when dancing to Radiohead classic “Creep,” as covered by the Mexican singer Carla Morrison. The line “I want a perfect body,” has never packed such a sucker punch as when accompanying this duet, with Veiga in a lace sports bra, negotiating what looks like an adolescent coupling, the lifts simultaneously beautiful but awkward. Suddenly, it was impossible to imagine Jonny Greenwood ever delivering this same mournful admission. “I’m a creep,” Morrison sings. “I wish I was special. What the hell am I doing here? I don’t belong here.”

One can only hope that as an adult, and now as a choreographer who can profoundly tell the story of being Latina in America, Manzanales knows that she does.