

Ballet Hispánico: Dance for the people

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Eduardo Vilaro and Ballet Hispánico embrace the unconventional as we'll have a chance to see at White Bird on Wednesday

The first thing to know about Ballet Hispánico? “Don’t get hung up on the name,” says artistic director Eduardo Vilaro. When you hear Ballet Hispánico, he suggests, “you think of a ballet company or a folkloric company. It’s neither. It’s as diverse in style as people are diverse.”

Case in point: the program the New York-based company is bringing to Portland through White Bird offers three different boundary-pushing works by choreographers whose influences stretch from Colombia to Mexico to Spain.

Belgian-Colombian choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa’s *Línea Recta* (Straight Line) approaches flamenco, which she studied as a child, from a contemporary dance perspective, bringing the dancers in closer physical contact than is common for the genre, and creating lines that intersect, bend and swirl. Mexican-American choreographer Michelle Manzanales sets what Vilaro calls her “identity struggle”—feeling too Mexican in some circles, too American in others—to Julio Iglesias and rock-en-español in her sometimes comic contemporary piece *Con Brazos Abiertos* (With Open Arms), which incorporates the Mexican symbols she distanced herself from during her Texas childhood. Mexican contemporary choreographer Tania Pérez-Salas rounds out the evening with her athletic *3. Catorce Dieciséis* (3. Fourteen, Sixteen), inspired by the circular characteristics of the mathematical formula Pi.

The rich panoply of Latin culture is evident not just in the work that Ballet Hispánico stages, but in its very existence. In 1970, founder Tina Ramirez, a Venezuelan native and the daughter of a Mexican bullfighter, created the company “to give voice to Latinos. We were voiceless in the arts” in the U.S. says Vilaro. As a Cuban native who immigrated with his family to New York when he was a youngster, Vilaro is dedicated to furthering Ramirez’s mission of education and representation, “showing what diversity can mean, and starting a dialogue,” he says. “Once you have a voice, what do you say?”



And in the face of financial uncertainty, how do you keep finding the means to say it? A former Ballet Hispánico dancer, Vilaro is only the second person to lead the company, a distinction he doesn’t take lightly. In 2009, “when I was approached to take over as artistic director, I said, ‘Let me do some research,’ and the research pointed toward failure,” he says with a laugh. But during a ten-year stretch between performing with and running Ballet Hispánico, he founded Luna Negra Dance Theater in Chicago, so he had an idea of the challenges he would face when he took the job, and specific ways to address them.

Marketing the company specifically, and promoting dance generally, were high on his list of priorities. “My first goal was making Ballet Hispánico a household name; I’m still working on that,” he says. In fact, “I think dance should be a household name. We put so much emphasis on sports, and this is such a fascinating art form.” He has also tackled the tandem issue of sustainability, and by that he doesn’t mean financial sustainability, although that’s a perennial question mark. “I think it’s about educating audiences ... bringing audiences closer to the process, demystifying dance,” he says. “Giving audiences the tools to make themselves part of dance work and language.”

Expanding the company’s reach beyond the typical downtown dance crowd is one way he’s doing that. “I wanted to get us out of just developing dance audiences,” Vilaro says. “One of the things I wanted to do was change where we perform in the city and find ways to give access. We started moving around—now we have an uptown season and a downtown season. We’re changing the idea of ‘You have to come here because it’s a dance space.’”

Ballet Hispánico is also cultivating the next generation of dancers and dance fans through its school—which serves 700 kids annually—and the New York City public-school kids it works with. Additionally, the company has established satellite programs in Houston and at Cal State Los Angeles, which has a large Latino student body. Besides bringing dance to the people, these programs fulfill another of Vilaro’s goals: to keep his dancers working beyond the standard performance season. “We’re bringing pedagogy to whoever will have us,” he says, only half-kidding.

Finding and developing new audiences is one part of the equation in running a successful dance company; finding and developing new artists is another. A program of work exclusively by women, even when women dominate the dance industry, is still uncommon enough to be remarkable, and so I remark on the program the company is bringing here.

“The dance world was always dominated by men; it’s populated by women,” Vilaro counters. “There has to be a conversation; we have to allow women to lead. As a man, I have to step away and trust.” But, he adds, if his small company can stage a program with work exclusively by women, anyone can.

“I think people get stuck on high-profile names and fear,” he says. Luckily, his own experience navigating a new world from a young age, and maintaining the legacy of a groundbreaking company, has helped him see potential in the unconventional. “As an immigrant,” he says, “I always had to think creatively.”

Ballet Hispánico performs 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, May 16 at Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, 1111 SW Broadway. Tickets available through White Bird.