



Dance Review: Ballet Hispanico offers refreshing change of pace and perspective

February 24, 2018 – Carrie Seidman



Visiting company presented by The Sarasota Ballet performs through Sunday at the FSU Center

While The Sarasota Ballet prepares for one of its more ambitious programs of the year — the premiere of Frederick Ashton’s “The Dream” and

David Bintley’s “Still Life’ at the Penguin Café” — it continued a recent tradition of presenting a guest company by bringing in Ballet Hispanico for the fifth program of its season. The New York-based troupe is the country’s premiere company devoted to providing an outlet for contemporary Latino dancers, choreographers and cultural expressions.

Founded in 1970 by Venezuelan Tina Ramirez, Ballet Hispanico last visited Sarasota in 2005 when it was still under Ramirez’s artistic direction, and it had been even longer than that since I had seen the company. In 2009, the reins were taken over by Eduardo Vilaro, a Cuban-born former dancer with the troupe and from the looks of the program presented here, he has stretched both the dancers and the menu to an impressive new boldness and professionalism.

All three of the works on the program were by living female choreographers, each actively engaged in producing some of the most interesting and original work coming out of the Latino arena. Anabelle Lopez Ochoa, one of the first female choreographers to earn commissions from

major companies around the world, is of Belgian/Colombian heritage and works out of the Netherlands. Michelle Manzanales is a Mexican-American who grew up in Texas and heads Ballet Hispanico's school in New York. And Tania Perez-Salas is one of Mexico's premiere choreographers, having grown up in Mexico City and founded her own company there in 1994. Two of the works were produced within Ballet Hispanico's Instituto Coreografico, an initiative designed to nurture Latino choreographers by allowing them the luxury of dancers, time and space to create.

Ochoa's "Linea Recta" ("Straight Line") was a deconstruction of flamenco imagery, filtered through a highly contemporary lens that cast aside the tradition of separation between male and female performers. To original music by Eric Vaarzon Morel for guitar and cajon, it opens with a female soloist whipping around a long, scarlet ruffled train (like an unfanned peacock's tail) as she is enthusiastically partnered by alternating men, her trailing tail whipping through her legs, winding around her waist or wrapping around her neck like a scarf.

All-female and all-male sections — the women have fans; the men slap their hands on the floor in lieu of the zapateando footwork — further dismantle the traditions of flamenco, while retaining the fierceness of its commitment and the gritos (shouts) of a nightclub in Seville. I only wished the music could have been played live.

Manzanales' first work for the company, "Con Brazos Abiertos," was an autobiographical exploration of the dichotomy of her youth, pulled between the Mexican heritage of her parents and the American setting of her childhood. Drawing on a variety of music and dialogue — the mix included the 1940s bolero, "Maria Bonita" sung by Julio Iglesias, nods to Cheech and Chong and El Chapo, and a poem by Maria Billini — a tortured soloist is torn between trying to fit in and trying to hide. (I regret that, from the program notes, it was not possible for me to identify and acknowledge individual dancers; whoever she was, she was terrific.) In some cases that's literal, such as when wide sombreros obscure the dancers' faces, or huge voluminous skirts (on both sexes), vigorously flourished like giant exploding blossoms, serve as billowing distractions.

In a relentlessly unreciprocal pas de deux, the soloist is unacknowledged by a male partner who, as she leans forward and places her hands on her thighs in a posture of defeat, crawls to sit on her back; it's as if she is being forced to carry the entire weight of her culture. A line from the movie, *Selena* — "We gotta be more Mexican than Mexicans and more American than Americans. It's exhausting!" — summed it all up nicely.

Perez-Salas' "3. Catorce Dieceis" ("3. Fourteen Sixteen") — so named for the initial digits of the mathematical Pi — employed an assortment of choral and instrumental Baroque music; intense, evocative lighting; an assortment of black, white and red costuming; and a lush but abstract movement vocabulary to explore the circularity and patterns of mathematics and life. While I wasn't sure what to make of several movements — including one in which two men appear to be having epileptic fits — as performed by these accomplished artists, it was a gorgeous feast for the eyes. My only disappointment was the (by now) overused finale of dancers with their backs to the audience walking slowly upstage into darkness.

While I heard a few grumbles from patrons who prefer their menu to include pointe shoes and tights, the dancers' classical training and fluid athleticism and the intriguing variety of choreographic perspectives were, to my mind, most welcome. And I applaud Sarasota Ballet Artistic Director Iain Webb for continuing to cede the floor to outside companies, doing of-the-moment contemporary work that nicely balances his own preference for the classical and historical. It stretches the local audience's comfort zone and (one hopes) palate, so they might become not just devotees of the Sarasota Ballet, but of dance in all its forms.

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