

TIMES COLONIST

Diversity and equality are forces shaping the best of Latin dance

Mike Devlin – April 5, 2018



What: Ballet Hispánico
Where: Royal Theatre
When: Friday and Saturday, 7:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$29-\$95 at the Royal McPherson box office (250-386-6121) or online at dancevictoria.com and rmts.bc.ca

The upside for Eduardo Vilaro of Ballet Hispánico is working for a company that checks several boxes. Creativity with a conscience — that’s an ideal scenario,

according to the Cuban-born dancer and administrator.

Not only does Ballet Hispánico offer something that satisfies the dance organization’s bottom line — and financial security is never a bad thing in the world of shrinking budgets — he ensures the Manhattan-based company also moves the needle culturally, celebrating through school programs and charity ventures the wider Latino community. “It’s my job as an artist and also a director that we mirror our environment,” Vilaro said. “If not, then why be a cultural organization?”

With roots in the Bronx during the early 1980s advent of hip-hop, his was a culturally rich upbringing. And when he thinks back to his youth, between images of his brother doing breakdance headspins on the sidewalk, Vilaro thinks of one centrifugal force: his mother. “I would not be here today if not for my mother’s strength and resilience,” he said.

The strength of Latino women played a significant role in creating a new program Vilaro is bringing to Victoria for two Ballet Hispánico performances at the Royal Theatre this weekend, featuring three works created by female Latina choreographers: Annabelle Lopez Ochoa’s *Línea Recta*, Michelle Manzanales’s *Con Brazos Abiertos*, and Tania Pérez-Salas’s *3.Catorce Dieciséis*.

“This a chance for me to start putting women at the forefront in a leadership role. We’re one of those cultures — and there are others out there — that is a little bit macho,” Vilaro said. “It is important to me, as part of our vision, that we’re exposing all our audiences to the diversity and multiplicity that is in the culture.”

The equality element is key, according to Vilaro. “The dance world is very male dominated. Although it’s all women dancers, the directors and the choreographers are usually men.” Vilaro came up through the ranks at Ballet Hispánico, starting out as a dancer with the company in 1985 before being named its artistic director nine years ago. His was an uphill battle at first. Juggling his modern-day beliefs with those of his company’s board members, innovation was his first order of business. To his delight, it was a relatively stress-free transition. In 2015, he was named CEO of Ballet Hispánico, taking over the company that was founded by choreographer Tina Ramirez in 1970.

When he assumed the reins, the company was a little more iconographic than Vilaro would have liked (“Some of it was stereotypical,” he said). Ballet Hispánico version 2.0 has been radically redesigned under Vilaro’s stewardship, bringing it to the forefront of contemporary dance companies in the U.S.

“That’s the first thing I had to face. I had to take this audience, and change their perception. And it took a good four years. But it turned around, and it really turned around. People got it. They understood.”

Bringing to the stage choreography by Manzanales, Ochoa and Pérez-Salas is a proud achievement for the company’s leader. Those outside the North American dance community have little idea of the struggles involved in changing the cultural tide, he said, and bringing audiences up to speed in a world where women are liberating themselves from the chains of the past hasn’t always been easy.

“People want to see the ballerina. People want to see the male partner. People want to see those social constructs that have been with us for so long. Man seeks comfort all the time, so it’s always hard. But that’s what art is about. It’s the dialogue of who we are and why we’re here. My attitude about doing things and taking risks are all about growing up in the Bronx, and having to deal, having to survive, and be resilient. That comes into play many times throughout everything I do. With the work that we do, I’m interested in being innovative.”

Manzanales is the director of Ballet Hispánico's school of dance, which has given a new generation of dancers hope. The company is putting money back into Latino communities across the U.S. through its public school programs and residencies, which have produced impressive results. "We do it through education," Vilaro said. "We have a school of 700 kids, and we have scholarships for students if they see themselves in this form. We give back. And I have seen the change. I have witnessed it."

A residency with a Los Angeles high school has been eye-opening. "When we came, they had a theatre that wasn't running. Now, the students are empowered and they are running it. Three of their graduates have gone on to work in the field, and they are all Latino kids from East L.A." mdevlin@timescolonist.com

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