

The
WONDERFUL
World of Dance

Ballet Hispanico's El Viaje and Homebound/ALAALA: visually captivating, diverse and unique

March 29, 2019 - Jennifer Jackson



When hearing of Ballet Hispánico, an assumption of classical ballet could be the first thing you would expect to see if you've never seen their work. I was pleasantly surprised to see an hour full of visually captivating, diverse, and incredibly unique contemporary works in my first time sitting in the capacity booked house of their full length concert at the Joyce Theater. The company performed two

world premieres and one noteworthy piece which premiered in late 2013. My hat goes off to these dancers for blowing the audience away with their amazing strength, impeccable timing, accuracy, togetherness, and overall artistry in movement qualities and initiations. Ballet Hispanico brought their work to life on stage as the lighting designers did an outstanding job with creating the environment supporting each story behind the dances. El Viaje, a brand new work choreographed by Edwaard Liang, began and ended with subtle movement. What I found interesting about this work was that the entire company cast never left the stage throughout it. All moments of stillness were purposeful and well paced. There was no use of props, and the

costumes were a soft and flowy ambient grey, contrasting with the bright red dress worn by the soloist.



Ballet Hispánico El Viaje Photo by Paula Lobo Ballet Hispánico – El Viaje. Photo by Paula Lobo

At first, the soloist was separate from the group, but then as the dance progressed, she was more parallel with the group and became interwoven into their soft grey abyss with other dancers breaking away from the group in a series of culminating duets and solos. She and the other dancers were engaging in a sort of push and pull from the whole group, but in the end the unison had drawn to conclusion as the dancers moved towards the sudden warm lighting appearing in a misty and whimsical downstage right. The music combined with the intentions in the movement evoked strong emotions as *El Viaje* unfolds the feelings of individuals leaving their homeland or country of birth to seek a new life. This work explores identity contrasting with ghosts of a former life, as this theme is clear from the contrasting costumes.



Gabrielle Sprauve and Lyvan Verdecia El Viaje Photo by Paula Lobo Ballet Hispánico – Gabrielle Sprauve and Lyvan Verdecia El Viaje. Photo by Paula Lobo

Sombrerísimo was a sudden shift in style and pace as the women of Ballet Hispánico had the audience holding their breathe as to not miss a moment. Annabelle Lopez Ochoa originally choreographed this for an all male cast which explains the masculine theme made apparent through the movement, costumes, and characters. How these dancers were still breathing at the end and never fumbled the hats they danced with was astonishing. The stamina, athletic partner work, and choreographic intricacy were executed so well that the dancers made it look effortless. Inspired by the well known visual artist Rene Magritte, the dancers wore bowler hats with fitted white sleeveless tops, grey pants, and grey socks. The stage environment had a late foggy night feel with a subtle but pleasant griminess. The first half was full of amazing execution of complex movements with shifting, switching, throwing, and catching of the hats. The lighting designer, Joshua Preston, had the dancer's shadow silhouettes in front of them as they danced adding a very cinematic experience.



Ballet Hispánico - Sombrerísimo (c) Susan Bestul Ballet Hispánico – Sombrerísimo. Photo by Susan Bestul

The tone changed in the second half with more colorful shirts and fast paced music. I enjoyed how at certain moments the dancers would engage in slight dialogue (not discernible) to strengthen their characters in the scene. Overall this piece was an audience favourite as the humorous and playful interactions came as dramatic surprises throughout a refreshingly gender fluid performance of androgenic characters. Developing characters throughout a dance is not the only thing Ballet Hispánico builds well, as the dancers used large boxes to build shapes impressively fast in their world premiere of Homebound/ALAALA choreographed by Bennyroyce Royton.



Ballet Hispánico in Homebound-Alaala, photo by Paula Lobo Ballet Hispánico in Homebound-Alaala. Photo by Paula Lobo

The lighting designer, Joe Doran, had a starry night theme as the dancers slowly began moving boxes wearing darker toned individualized casual costumes with subtle hints of varying cultures. “This side up” or “heavy” were words shown on some of the boxes and once again I enjoyed the dancer’s purposeful use of props playing a huge part in the choreography phrases. There were solo and duet interactions mixed with functional movement of boxes, layered phrases into canons, and an a mixture of rearranging boxes in the space before it sped up in the last section.



Ballet Hispánico in Homebound-Alaala. Photo by Paula Lobo Ballet Hispánico in Homebound-Alaala. Photo by Paula Lobo

The same phrases that were done slowly, in the beginning, were then performed very quickly with the same large boxes. Dancers were rushing to each side of the stage placing them in huge

stack lightning fast. I was moved by how emotionally connected they were to the boxes which were symbolic in the choreographer's intention in the quest for home. It was an intersection of cultures through idea sharing and the process of unity through overcoming hardship, as shown through the separating, rearranging, and coming together of shapes by use of these boxes. Ballet Hispánico is a company I will look out to see in the future as they did not just perform dances, but they created an experience. They are shaping our current world's definition of ballet as it intersects with different cultures, as their technique required the same precision and artistry that is required of ballet, hip movement, modern floor work, and jazz style isolations were heavily integrated. The works they perform are relative to parts of world history that is not in topics of american conversation enough, and they are a pillar in representation of the role that culture plays in art and dance.

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