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ON BEING MEXICAN-AMERICAN: A CELEBRATION OF CULTURE WITH BALLET HISPANICO AT THE RIALTO



WORDS BY SYDNEY BURROWS |
IMAGES BY PAULA LOBO In white, minimal costumes that accentuated their muscles, the dancers of Ballet Hispanico opened the evening with *Con Brazos Abiertos*, a piece that showcased their athleticism and commented on the often contradicting cultures Mexican Americans inhabit. Inspired by her heritage and life experiences, Michelle Manzales choreographed the work to music ranging from traditional songs by Julio Iglesias to “Creep” by Radiohead, and

used Mexican symbols such as the sombrero and colorful skirts alongside fresh, contemporary movement. The rest of the evening included *Linea Recta*, choreographed by Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, and Eduardo Vilaro’s *Danzon*. *Danzon* had a combination of Afro-Cuban social dance and traditional Cuban dances, while *Linea Recta* highlighted the unique lack of physical contact in flamenco dance. Both of these pieces were visually striking, but after I left the theater, I found myself reflecting the most upon *Con Brazos Abiertos*. After an opening where the dancers performed all together on stage, impressing with their flawless ballet technique, *Con Brazos Abiertos* transitioned into a very different vibe. The men and women returned with sombreros, dressed in tan pants and tops, and danced to a poem by Maria Billini-Padilla about the difficulty of living somewhere in-between: being “not Mexican enough” and “not American enough.” A soloist came out next, with a darker colored sombrero. She danced with it as if it were her partner. At first it seemed as if they were celebrating together. But later, she kicked the sombrero

up into the air and slumped to the floor, exhausted by the weight of her own heritage. She moved it to her foot, her hand, her head, trying to find a way to fit it on, a metaphor for trying to fit into her culture. The sombrero held an obvious weight, and when she placed it on her back, it pushed her forward, down into the ground. When she exited, the other women came in, this time with flowy skirts and flowers in their hair. The men followed, their movements more grounded than the women's. The outfits and distinction of choreography immediately defined the different gender roles. With the men dancing to the male voice in the music, and the women to the female's, the dancers moved in and out of the floor effortlessly, and leaped with incredible buoyancy. The women showed off their technique with lots of turns and developes, and subtle, feminine gestures; while the men demonstrated their strength with movement that rippled through their bodies. This section felt a little bit like a high school dance: the men and women dancing in their own separate corners, but then coming together to flirt and dance in pairs. The dancers moved in simple formations – the classic rotating X, constant cannons, and intertwining lines – but these basic tools were made more advanced by the intricate choreography and strong pull of the message of the dance. The highlight of this section was a moment of male-to-male partnering that broke up the traditional sequences. The duo took turns helping the other fly through the air in dynamic lifts that pushed me back in my seat. After all but one male dancer had exited stage, the original soloist came in and confronted him. With incredible momentum, she fell, and he caught her by the back of her neck. I may or may not have audibly gasped. It was a simple moment, but the trust, and the intimate nature of this trust fall made my chest ache. Their duet played with power dynamics and struggle, and concluded with the woman using the man as a punching bag, expelling all of her energy, before completely releasing and falling into an embrace. For the big finale, the entire company danced in long, flowing skirts that they held in their hands, until one woman finally stopped dancing and dropped her skirt to the ground. The gender roles fell away, and the company danced in unison, the skirts breathing with them, adding their own movement to the dancers'. Using choreography that had been repeated throughout the work, my favorite being a brushing motion that the dancers moved through their bodies, the dance came around full circle, ending with a huge celebration of the beauty of Mexican-American culture.