



Dance as a First Language: An Art Talk with Ballet Hispánico's Michelle Manzanales

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MICHELLE MANZANALES

For **Ballet Hispánico**'s Michelle Manzanales, dance is more than an art form. As she explained during a telephone interview, "Dance is my language; I always think of it as my first language. It's the one that I feel most fluent in and most comfortable expressing things through." A dancer since she was three, Manzanales currently heads up Ballet Hispánico's School of Dance, having moved into that position after stints with the company as both a rehearsal director and an artistic associate. She is also a working choreographer, and developed her first major work *Con Brazos Abiertos*, with Ballet Hispánico's Instituto Coreográfico, which has received NEA grant support. We spoke with Manzanales about not being able to leave dance

behind even as she pursued an undergraduate business degree, how the Instituto gave her the freedom to imagine *Con Brazos Abiertos*, and the importance of questioning to her work as both an artist and an administrator.

NEA: What was your journey to becoming professionally involved with dance?

MICHELLE MANZANALES: I started dance when I was three years old. My sister was a dancer and I would go and watch her taking classes. My mother told me that I really, really wanted to dance as well and so as soon as I was old enough, she enrolled me in a very small studio in the suburbs of Houston, Texas. I danced there through my high school years and went to the University of Houston and actually pursued a business degree. Even though I don't remember my family ever saying, "You can't study dance," I think it was an unspoken thing

within the culture. You went to university to have a better life and a better life is often equated with how much money you can earn and how you can get ahead. What I found as I was studying for a business degree [was] that I kept coming back to dance. I was teaching, I was choreographing all while I was going to school, and I spent just as much time in the dance department as the business school. After college, I actually did pursue business for about a year, but still was dancing professionally in smaller companies in Houston. Eventually I just realized, "I want to dance and so I'm going to dance." I've been making a living and completely being supported financially through dance since that moment.

NEA: Among the many hats you wear as a dance professional, you are a choreographer. What's your mission statement as a choreographer?

MANZANALES: In my choreography, I like to balance the beautiful artistry and exquisiteness of the physicality of dance with an intention. What conversation are we starting through the choreography? Hopefully, some emotion is evoked or some thought is evoked, some conversation when the curtain goes down. What is the conversation after? For me as a choreographer that's always what's in my mind that's pushing me forward. The beautiful thing about [being part of] Ballet Hispánico is that through their mission... we're starting conversations about breaking down stereotypes, looking at these iconic [Latinx] symbols, talking about them, and creating conversations.

I have been choreographing since I can remember and I love to choreograph. When I came to Ballet Hispánico in 2010, it was actually the first time in the arts where I was able to have a full-time job in one organization. Usually as dance artists, we're gypsies running all over the place doing different things. but Ballet Hispánico was the first time that I was able to focus on one area—being the rehearsal director and also artistic associate to Eduardo [Vilaro, Ballet Hispánico's artistic director]. When the opportunity for participating in [the company's] Instituto Coreográfico came up—I had been doing other choreography projects but they were very small—I was feeling a little nervous and [thinking,] "Wow, am I going to be able to do this?" What I learned though is I had had this amazing opportunity of seeing all these other incredible choreographers in their craft by being their rehearsal director so inadvertently I was having this Instituto [experience] happening all along. What makes it such a great program is that it's about really exercising your choreographic tools and it's not meant to be product-driven. If you think back with [Paul] Taylor and [Martha] Graham, these major pioneers, many of them had benefactors that put them in a studio and they were able to hone their craft because they had this support, whereas the choreographers of today are asked to spit out a masterpiece in three weeks or a month if they're lucky, right? What the Instituto does is it gives you two weeks, sometimes three depending on what the funding is, to just hone your craft.

That's where [my ballet] *Con Brazos Abiertos* was born. I was able to take an idea and flesh out different thoughts and have a really great experience with these beautiful dancers with the support of the staff of Ballet Hispánico. From that, Eduardo was able to say, "You know what, I'd really love you to develop this piece further [for the company]." I had this huge head start because I'd had this opportunity to start the process and get ideas in mind, so then when I went in to actually set the piece, I was way further into it than if I had just been hired to do a piece for this company [over a] three-week period. Having the luxury of not having to put my first draft on the stage was liberating. I also realized that in my choreography it's important for me to do work

that has subject matter that is important to me. That's when I do my best work—when I'm really connected to what it is that I'm saying.

NEA: You also lead the dance school for Ballet Hispánico. What's your focus in that role?

MANZANALES: What's important to me as the director of the School of Dance at Ballet Hispánico is giving the students knowledge and preparing them for wherever their heart is going to take them next. We want to make sure that they see many possibilities ahead of them, whether that possibility is to be a famous flamenco dancer, a choreographer, a school director, someone that works in arts administration, someone that goes on to be a doctor, someone that becomes a composer or a lawyer, whatever it is. The skills that we're giving them are first of all values—how to be a hard worker, how to think critically, how to be professional in their demeanor and in their respect for what we're doing, how to understand protocols, all of those things. And then also of course exquisite beautiful dancing and... respecting all the forms that live under the dance umbrella.

There are so many other things that go underneath that dance umbrella so I find it important at Ballet Hispánico that we're having conversations, that we're questioning things, learning, being inquisitive, exploring, discovering together where is dance going to go now. And then [our job is] providing a space where what we have decided to put into our curriculum, we're doing with excellence. [It's also important that] we're still continuing to have our teachers feel that they're growing, that they're learning, they're not staying stagnant, they're questioning things as well, and that we're addressing what's happening through culture too. [I think about]: what does our student body look like? What does our faculty look like and how is it reflective of what's happening in the United States and in the world?

NEA: How do your roles as an administrator and an artist inform each other?

MANZANALES: Not that you couldn't be an amazingly effective administrator if you didn't have any arts background, but for me [it's important] to be in a position of leadership in an organization such as this and to have that dance and arts knowledge and bring it into how the decision making is being played out. I've realized how important that is that people of color and people from different cultures and backgrounds and experiences are in positions of leadership because it's crucial for what the decision making is and to what programs are coming out and how we're communicating with our community that is here, how we're communicating with the community at large, the other dance organizations, being a part of different larger organizations like National Association of Schools of Dance. Given the background that I've had and now being this administrator, how am I also informing that conversation that's happening at a different level? I think it's very important for us to remember what it was like to be the artist as we're making these decisions because we can forget and start to think solely about the bottom line. I think that's a dangerous place to go. I encourage my staff members to go into the classroom, experience it, see what's happening. Some of them are dancers; some of them are former dancers. They're choreographers; they have their own companies. Some of them don't have a dance background, maybe they're writers or they have something else, but how are they immersing themselves in the arts so that as they make these [administrative] choices they're remembering why are these protocols in place, why are we doing these things, that it's all to support the art form and what's happening in the building.

I think when you are on the administrative side [as an artist], you can understand more fully sometimes why a decision is made that maybe was a difficult decision about funding or time or those kinds of things. Like when I went into the studio with the company dancers to create *Con Brazos Abiertos*, I definitely had a much greater appreciation for every second of time that I had with the dancers because I know how incredibly difficult it is to fund that and every minute means hundreds of hours of work for development, for our operations, for our board. So that definitely gave me a different perspective. But it also inspired the artist inside me to do my best work because it's a very precious thing to be given an opportunity like that. As artists sometimes we get that bad rap of we always need that extra week or we always need more time and of course we would love to have that but [being an administrator] helped me [with] time management. I think [I was able] to be more successful within the project because I had this other experience of the administrative side of it.

NEA: If I could only write one thing about the work you do at Ballet Hispánico, what would you want me to say?

MANZANALES: I feel very fortunate, very blessed to be at an organization such as Ballet Hispánico where I don't have to be put into a box. So even though I hold the title of School of Dance Director, I can still think creatively as a choreographer, as a teacher, as an arts administrator, and I like how [those roles] all inform each other, support each other, and hopefully, make everything about this feel more holistic. I encourage people to remember that when we're putting labels on people, just remember that there are many different facets to us and the people that are on our staff, the people that are the dancers that come in the door, the dancers that are in the company. They are much more complex. We are not one thing. We are not a stereotype so having open conversations and creating dialogue and just remembering to see the full circumference of things is something that drives me.

*Interested in learning more about Ballet Hispánico? Click through for our **interview with Artistic Director Eduardo Vilaro.***