

THE SPIRIT

WESTY 2019 Honoree: Dance in the neighborhood

April 10, 2019 – Madeline Thompson



Eduardo Vilaro followed his American dream to become artistic director and CEO of Ballet Hispanico

Eduardo Vilaro on West 89th Street. Photo courtesy of Eduardo Vilaro

“Erasure and visibility are things that now we can talk about.” Eduardo Vilaro of Ballet Hispanico

Eduardo Vilaro, 54, fell in love with dance when he played Linus in his eighth grade production of “You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown” and made up a routine involving a towel for the part. “I was hooked,” he says. After that, he pulled his “Billy Elliott stunt” and began telling his parents he was going to Brazilian martial arts class when in fact he was sneaking into the ballet studio next door. “You do what you do and it’s in your heart,” he says. Vilaro is now approaching his 10-year anniversary as artistic director and CEO of Ballet Hispanico, a dance school and performing arts troupe that showcases Latin styles. The organization itself will turn 50 in 2020. Vilaro’s family immigrated from Cuba in 1969 and settled

in the Bronx. He says he has always been influenced by the immigrant experience. “It was about trying to be a professional and following that American dream,” he says. He found Cuban music

very intoxicating as a child and loved the connection it forged to his roots. Buoyed by the urgency embedded in his DNA, Vilaro pursued his American dream with vigor. He was accepted into the Alvin Ailey summer program, worked at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance and ultimately got a scholarship to Adelphi University. “I had to come out to my parents” as a dancer, he says, laughing. “My mother really embraced it. It was great.” Vilaro was about to graduate from college when he picked up a copy of Dance magazine and found out about Ballet Hispanico. He auditioned for them in 1985 and, for the first time, saw himself represented in the company. Founder Tina Ramirez offered Vilaro a job right away, and he left Adelphi with a month of school remaining. “It was one of those, ‘do it now or don’t do it,’” he recalls. Vilaro spent a few years in Chicago, where he founded Luna Negra Dance Theater, and then returned to New York and Ballet Hispanico in 2009. The fact that, as a young dancer, he’d never heard of Ballet Hispanico continues to inspire him today. “It’s one of the things that spurs my leadership with this organization, to make it known for what it has given to our arts landscape,” he says. “Erasure and visibility are things that now we can talk about.” Responsibility to the Community New Yorkers may no longer think of the Upper West Side as a Latino community, but when Ballet Hispanico was founded in 1970 on West 89th Street, it was a completely different, more diverse, more unstable neighborhood. “We stayed because it was right,” Vilaro says. “And we stay now as a reminder that this wasn’t always, you know, specialized schools for the wealthy in the neighborhood and speciality restaurants. I think it’s important to stay and remind everyone that there is a cultural organization. It’s culturally relevant to the history of this great city.” Unlike many Upper West Side businesses, Ballet Hispanico has not had a particularly difficult time of it. They own the building’s two carriage houses and a tower that they share with some condominiums. “For a Latino-founded organization to have real estate in New York City: Wow,” Vilaro says. That comes with its own challenges, however. In 2016 a nearby water main break flooded their basement and first-floor studios. The water badly damaged costumes and sets, but a flood recovery fundraiser on their website raised over \$20,000. The Upper West Side has always been welcoming to Ballet Hispanico, so the organization tries to honor its responsibility to the community in return — for example, by throwing an annual block party during Hispanic Heritage Month. “We close the street up, we have performances and there’s loud Latin music,” Vilaro said. “Everybody comes out and loves it.” Ballet Hispanico also redid its facade to be “friendlier,” so passersby could look into the studios and see what was going on. About 1,000 children take classes at the school every year, and 19,000 kids across the country participate in Ballet Hispanico’s education programs. Vilaro, who no longer performs with the company, lives in Irvington with his husband and son. “When I’m not directing I’m a soccer mom,” Vilaro jokes. “My family life really balances me.” He loves to cook and go birdwatching, though he has yet to see Central Park’s famous Mandarin duck.