

# FINANCIAL TIMES

## **Ballet Hispanico, Joyce Theater, New York** A new artistic director steers the company away from populist Latino cliché and towards fertile new ground

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Rodney Hamilton, Vanessa Valecillos, Mario Ismael Espinoza dance 'Espiritu'

New artistic director Eduardo Vilaro is slinking away from the “sizzling hot” Broadway ballets and folksy nostalgia fests that have littered the Ballet Hispanico stage for decades. The pieces he has assembled and commissioned for his second year do not “celebrate”, much less advertise Latino culture; they simply dig into a fertile patch.

*Nube Blanco* (on the first week of this two-week engagement) is Belgian-Colombian choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa’s third piece since Vilaro took over. It dispenses with her usual stylish but complacent commentary on female abjection for a bright, rich comedy. With this new piece she finally seems to have justified the troupe’s commitment to her.

*Nube Blanco* imagines “the battle of the sexes” by way of flamenco: the triangle of fingers the man places on his pelvis; the heavy shoes and their clatter; the nonsense syllables by which the clan rouses the soloist to new heights of writhing. Lopez Ochoa disassembles and reassembles the coded rituals and rhythms until they spark insight and laughter.

Less effective is Vilaro's *Azuka*, which fuses a dance on the theme of salsa and society with a bio-dance of late salsa singing queen Celia Cruz. But its aim is true: to bend the rolling salsa steps towards Cuba's vexed history. At last Latin-American social dance signifies something other than sex.

The new regime's most promising sign is the Ronald K. Brown commission. *Espiritu Vivo* takes its name and four songs from the 2002 album of celebrated Afro-Peruvian singer Susana Baca. Even more lovely than her floating voice was the way she faced the stage and sang up to the dancers.

As usual with this exceptional choreographer, the dance concerns a journey from struggle to salvation; and as usual Brown rings new variations on the theme. Here he envisions struggle as a desert of individuals set at odd angles to each other: after their salvation, they find it no easier to keep their balance, but less is at stake if they fall.

On the way out I heard someone complain that the company had changed. There is an audience, however, that would rejoice. Vilaro only needs to find them.

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