



BALLET HISPANICO: MOVING FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

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If you've never seen a concert by the New York-based Ballet Hispanico, you may not know what to expect. Ballet? Flamenco? Salsa? Something in between? The company attempts a tricky balancing act, performing a repertory of works that blend Latin dance with both ballet and modern techniques. In the company's two-week season at the Joyce (through April 29th), it called on the established modern-dance choreographer Ronald K. Brown (he created the dances for the current Broadway production of "The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess") for one of its premières, and it proved to be a savvy choice.

Brown's style fuses modern forms with West African and Afro-Caribbean motifs, and his piece for Ballet Hispanico, "Espiritu Vivo," for eight dancers, perfectly illustrates this combination.

The work is in four sections, and the music for each is by a different composer; all of the songs are interpreted by the great Peruvian singer Susana Baca. The first section, “The News,” is set to Javier Lazo’s “La Noche y el Dia,” whose gentle guitar chords and drumming draw us into a contemplative atmosphere.

The men wear loose pants and hooded shirts, in earth tones, and the women are in gold wide-legged jumpsuits, also with hoods. The head coverings add a sombre, serious note, evoking both devotion (monks or nuns) and mourning. Brown has created easy, casual phrases that follow the burbling music and Baca’s sweet, soft voice—but a sense of loss pervades. Low rhythmic movements show the influence of African dance and its weightedness, and Brown makes the stage percolate by mixing in attitude turns on half-toe. In slow, backward-arching lunges, the dancers lift their arms to the sky—an act of surrender, or supplication.

The dancers are still hooded in the second section, “Prayer,” and the feeling onstage remains subdued. “The Anchor Song,” by Björk, is the accompaniment, which Baca sings in Spanish. It’s meditative and poetic, the lyrics conveying a strong sense of solitude and private communion. (“I live by the ocean / And during the night / I dive into it / Down to the bottom / Underneath all currents / And drop my anchor / This is where I’m going / This is my home.”) Two men have a lyrical duet in unison, turning and dipping, but Brown separates them in space and in their facings, unfolding the movement for us, allowing us to see inside it. Their dancing requires plenty of technique, but it stays grounded in the everyday: at the end of it, the men bend down and languidly sweep the dust from their feet.

“Spring,” the third section, is set to “13 de Mayo,” by the Brazilian singer and guitarist Caetano Veloso, and in it the spell of the first two sections is broken; the hoods come off, the music is up-tempo and infectious, and the performers allow themselves to relax and even to smile. (The subject of Veloso’s song gives ample reason for this: on May 13, 1888, slavery was abolished in Brazil.) The movement is playful, and Brown makes great use of the dancers’ upper bodies and arms, which move with a new freedom. Torsos tilt and twist; arms describe wide arcs in the air. A series of brief solos—one dancer occupies center stage briefly, then is replaced by another, entering from the wings, and so on, through half a dozen turns—expands the work, and allows it to breathe.

Throughout “Espiritu Vivo,” Brown arranges the stage masterfully, creating discrete worlds with his groupings. And he works subtly. The piece has a loose through-line of darkness to light, but the choreographer speaks his ideas plainly, rather than screaming them. The fourth and final section, “New Day,” continues the upbeat mood of the previous dance, but Brown tempers the celebration—he seems to say that joy should be an expected part of life. A sense of community possesses the performers as they walk slowly, rhythmically, around the stage, their hips swaying, their expressions open. As Baca sings “Afro Blue / Zum Zum,” by Ricardo Pereira and the Cuban conga master Mongo Santamaria, Brown’s choreography affirms a sense of belonging, of perseverance. As the piece closes, the dancers ring the stage on three sides, standing nobly, their arms swinging freely before them, a newfound—or rediscovered—calmness settling in.

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