



At Ballet Hispanico, a trio of Latin divas accompany two exciting, new works

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NEW YORK—Three phenomenal singers drive **Ballet Hispánico's** spring season at the Joyce Theater.

It's no surprise to hear vibrant, Latin music at this company's performances, yet the season's first program—featuring the legendary voices of María Dolores Pradera, Susana Baca and the late Célia Cruz—still manages to confound expectations. Company director Eduardo Vilaro, who took the reins in 2009, remains determined to shake things up. In addition to "Espíritu Vivo," an exciting collaboration between Ballet Hispánico and hotshot choreographer Ronald K. Brown, the lineup includes "Nube Blanco," by Anabelle López Ochoa. Teasing and at times outrageous, "Nube Blanco" employs flamenco motifs without succumbing to clichés, and its taut construction allows López Ochoa to be daring. Vilaro's new work, "Asuka,"—the title refers to Cruz's welcome shout, ¡Azúcar!—is more contrived, but cannot dampen this terrific evening, which alternates with a mix of company favorites through Sunday. Before she allows the audience to enjoy the old-fashioned boleros sung by La Pradera, López Ochoa treats us to the sound of water dripping, a provocation that sums up the spirit of this dance. Romantic friction between men and women will be what gives "Nube Blanco" its spark. Like the dance itself, the women know how to get attention. Andrea Salamanca nudges Mario Espinoza, rubbing up against him, prodding him - and resorting to a slap, when necessary. The central duet for Jamal Callender and Kimberly Van Woesik is equal parts desire and confrontation, with Van Woesik goading Callender and launching herself at him, then clinging tight as he swings her around.



Rosalie O'Connor
Jamal Callender and Kimberly Van Woesik of Ballet Hispanico

Women are clearly the leaders here. Even when they aren't on stage, their presence is felt. A row of carefully placed red high-heeled shoes, for instance, reminds Rodney Hamilton to turn out his feet.

Tense or slyly casual, the movement is studded with flamenco stamps and hand-clapping. The imagery can be zany, especially when Jessica Wyatt turns up in a powder-puff costume that suggests the "white cloud" of the title. Yet the choreographer's skillful handling of ensembles, with oppositions suddenly emerging within a tight formation, ensures that the tickling doesn't get out of hand.

Ronald K. Brown's "Espíritu Vivo" is grave and more subdued. Yet this dance, too, is masterfully built with widely spaced patterns that only gradually reveal themselves, and stunning diagonal layers moving in counterpoint. Subtlety and simplicity are among Brown's virtues; along with the way, he creates a community of independent souls giving each dancer an internal light. Susana Baca makes a guest appearance, accompanying the piece with her musicians, and the dancers acknowledge her from the stage.

Brown has discovered a new vocabulary for this piece, which begins with the dancers' heads bowed, wringing their hands nervously as they react to an unspecified disaster in a section titled "The News." Hamilton leads a male trio in the central "Prayer" section and then joyful rhythms dispel the gloom. The dancers seem reborn in "Spring." Their hands flutter like bird wings, and they brush the space clean, assembling a three-sided opening that seems to beckon us, inviting viewers to join them at the end.

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