



BWW Reviews: Ballet Hispanico at the Joyce Theater

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***Sortijas* with Lauren Alzamora and Jamal Rashann Callender
Choreography by [Cayetano Soto](#), Photo by Paula Lobo**

Ballet Hispanico's program at [The Joyce Theater](#) on April 16th opened with *Jardi Tancat*, a dance by Spanish choreographer [Nacho Duato](#) that has a history. It has achieved the status of a [modern](#) classic and is now performed by many dance companies across the world and as such will survive no matter what any one dance company does to it. [Ballet Hispanico](#) does it well and

that is the good [news](#). All the steps are there and done with enthusiastic precision and these are all top notch dancers who are versatile and talented.

The illuminating element that shows what is missing is contained within the person of Vanessa Valecillos. Alone within the company, Valecillos invests the movement of *Jardi Tancat* with the depth of feeling and pathos that is needed. She obviously knows this ballet inside and out and was never off in mood or intentionality of movement. Jamal Rashann Callender came closest to her in being able to transmit the emotional baggage that this ballet carries. He's a powerful, sculptural dancer. Min-Tzu Li, by contrast, is light, airy and a pleasure to watch. She is a lovely dancer, perhaps the company's best, with great technique and a pure line. But that is not what is needed in this ballet. It has to have weight, both emotional and physical. Context is as important to dance as it is to other art forms and it is a testament to the solid structure of Duato's choreography that it is fairly impervious to the loss of the original passion.

Choreographed in 1983, this ballet followed the death of Generalissimo Francisco Franco by just eight years. Franco had ruled Spain, and especially Catalonia which is where this music derives from, with an iron fist from 1939 until his death in 1975. It's easy to forget now that he was a fascist and a contemporary of Hitler. There is a weight of grief to life after Franco, a sense of Catalonians (and all Spaniards) painfully beginning to work their way out of decades of repression. That was in some part what Duato was choreographing. It was missing here.

If you want to know where the passion that was missing from *Jardi Tancat* went, look no further than *Sortijas*, the new [ballet](#) choreographed by [Cayetano Soto](#), a rising Spanish choreographer. Probably not coincidentally, Soto is from Catalonia, specifically from Barcelona. He is clearly the heir of Duato even though he is very much his own man. Soto has his own dance vocabulary, full of sharp angles, abrupt movements and lots of intricate partnering. *Sortijas* is a pas de deux that contains nothing that you ever learned in [dance](#) classes and the effect is powerful.

Every movement and moment has some significance and emotional power. The lifts are joltingly off-balance with twisted arms and legs held in opposition to the body. It requires terrific strength in the center of the body to be able to hold these positions in mid-air and Lauren Alzamora was rock hard where she needed to be and achingly vulnerable when she melted into her partner. Jamal Rashann Callender, partnering Alzamora, was powerful in his own right and is a performer of fine intensity. Between them they managed to turn the strenuous push-pull of the partnering into an expression of the outer manifestation of an inner struggle against fate.

It is not immediately apparent that this is the subtext of the [ballet](#) and it would have been helpful if there had been program notes to elucidate. This dance is about the ties that bind us together and the forces of fate that keep us from being able to realize our ambitions. The haunting music for this piece was *What Kind of Heart*, by Lhasa de Sela, who was fated to die from cancer at the age of 37. The song ponders what kind of heart a blind man would choose to wear in the dark for love. The haunting lyrics cast a dark shadow over this piece that lingers long after the curtain falls. [Cayetano Soto](#) is one of the top young choreographers in the world right now whose vision and expression of [dance](#) is edgy, compelling and passionate.

Rounding out the program was *A vueltas con los ochenta*, a piece choreographed by the Spanish choreographers Meritxell Barberá and Inma García. This [ballet](#) conjures the 1980s, Madrid style. Nostalgia is risky business if it wallows in sentimentality while wearing rose colored glasses. Thankfully Barberá and García avoided that trap. While the opening number was amusing with each of the dancers wearing headphones and dancing to different music, it also pointed to the beginning of some serious self-absorption, isolation and emptiness. Sweet, yes, but also with more than a touch of vinegar. The isolationist Walkman never went away from that time on, it merely evolved into cd players and finally the iPod.

The MTV style hot, black leather club outfits they wore for this ballet verged on campiness but there was real aggression in the streets of Spain and this [ballet](#) explored the violence between men and women as well as street fighting. Mario Ismael Espino, leaking testosterone, crowd surfed and lip synched with winking macho energy that energized the crowd. Here again, Vanessa Valecillos shone with a chilling rendition of a drug overdose. Her ability to invest her movements with such vitality and authenticity is a testament to her experience as a dancer. According to the program notes Valecillos is also a teacher of dance. Hopefully she will continue with it because she has much to offer and probably should be coaching the dancers in [Jardi Tancat](#).

Overall the experience of [Ballet Hispanico](#) is real pleasure. There are many fine dancers here beyond those already mentioned. This is strong dancing with high energy and top level technique. It easily ranks among the best of the contemporary [dance](#) companies in the city. It's easy to see why the crowd was so full of enthusiasm. There are three separate programs playing through April 27th at [The Joyce Theater](#) and any one of them is worth seeing.