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Ballet Hispanico reaches joyous heights in New Orleans, aided by the Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra



Chris Waddington, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune
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Ballet Hispanico met the Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra in a joyous New Orleans dance concert on Saturday (Dec. 8). The program of three dances at the Mahalia Jackson Theater for the Performing Arts put a spotlight on the long-time collaboration between two of New York's most vaunted institutions: a 20-piece big band with links to Jazz at Lincoln Center, and a pioneering dance troupe that opened doors for Hispanic artists and introduced elements of Latin social dance to the concert stage.

For this show, which was presented by the New Orleans Ballet Association, the company reached deep into its repertoire with a 1984 dance, "Tito on Timbales," by William Whitener and "Club Havana," a 2000 dance by Pedro Ruiz. The company had performed the latter on its previous New Orleans appearance.

"Club Havana" impressed me when I reviewed it 4 year ago, and the strengths of that 2008 account were equally evident on Saturday. Ballet Hispanico's cadre of 13 dancers deftly integrate hip-shakes, undulating torsos and the whip-crack releases of social dance, mixing them with ballet arabesques, and with floor work and expressionist gestures from modern dance. The dancers performed with consistent musicality, moving ahead of the beat and falling back with the aplomb of jazz improvisers. In this, they had the stunning example of the pit orchestra, which supported them with spot-on solos and muscular arrangements.

If there were flaws on Saturday, they were revealed only when Ballet Hispanico topped itself. "Danzon," a 2009 piece by artistic director Eduardo Vilaro, led the dancers to greater heights with choreography that showed its Latin roots while eschewing the sultry, sometimes clichéd theatricality of the ballroom. There were moments of astounding athleticism, but in contrast to "Club and 'Tito," every movement seemed harnessed to a genuine theatrical purpose.

Vilaro's choreographic vocabulary is refreshingly contemporary. He adds breathing room to complex dance phrases by having his dancers bisect the stage at a walk, jog casually into position, or skip in unison. He slows the action to better savor a graceful rise onto demi-point. He stops dancers in gut-clenching crouches, and releases them to soar through ecstatic canons. He welds them into stage-spanning ensembles whose unanimity rivals the quicksilver directional shifts of schooling fish. And he gives his dancers leeway: in a solo set to a clarinet cadenza, one male dancer channeled his inner faun in a capering, undulant, free-spirited dance that seemed to be improvised on the spot. Most impressively, Vilaro knows how to seal an emotional connection. At the conclusion of one duet, for example, he dimmed the lights as the couple embraced, brought the lights up, and dimmed them repeatedly, drawing the audience into a moment of breathtaking intimacy. Now, isn't that what you want from a dance?