

PALM BEACH ARTSPAPER

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Ballet Hispanico a knockout at Duncan



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Last night at the Duncan Theatre in Lake Worth, New York-based Ballet Hispanico continued its 43-year-old tradition of presenting dance that explores the diversity of Latino culture and presented a program of contemporary work that was impeccably performed and deeply artistic.

Jardi Tanca, the opening work on the program, was the very first work of Spanish choreographer Nacho Duato, whose excellent pieces have been seen in many companies worldwide. The simplicity of presentation, in both the set and costume design (also by Duato), framed and enhanced the beauty and craft of this outstanding work which was so flawlessly and seamlessly performed that the dance just vibrated with artistry.

Inspired by Catalan folk tales, Duato's depiction of three couples waiting on a barren field for rain, was timeless and exceptionally memorable. Duato skillfully used the reoccurring image of the dancers' backs to draw us in as if we shared the same vista and same plight. We were drawn to these humble people's sense of grace at the mercy of their unforgiving, dry farmland.

Jardi Tanca started quietly, building unison movement in total silence with astonishing clarity. It was mesmerizing as reams of movement phrases permeated the void and the six sensational dancers divided and joined in absolute unity and artistic integrity. These dancers were wonderful in their refined movement dynamics, totally synchronized, and beautifully natural.

Later as the sounds of Maria del Mar Bonet's songs filled the air, the couples presented a more personal side of themselves dancing with outstanding fluid and kinetic partnering. Vanessa Valecillos and Major Nesby tried to share their hope in their interconnected duet. A more lyrical duet followed with Kimberly Van Woesik and Floridian Joshua Peter Winzeler. The final duet with Min-Tzu Li and Jamal Rashann Callender had a sense of desperation.

As the director is recognized for adding another dimension to the artistry of the performers in a movie, so should the rehearsal director in a dance company be recognized. Ballet Hispanico's rehearsal director is Michelle Manzanales. Talented dancers, even with refined artistic sensibilities, need to be well-rehearsed by an outside eye who can foster and mold the vital cohesion to the choreography.

When all is successfully woven together, there is palpable sense of completeness and awe, not unlike the sense of admiration one might have looking at the complicated internal workings of a well-oiled and intricate machine. When it all comes together, as it did with this performance of *Jardi Tanca*, it is inspiring dance.

A clever, inventive and sassy work, *Nube Blanco*, by choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, was next on the program. It was an engaging, slightly off-kilter work that had a reflective but delightfully humorous take on the drama that never ends between man

and woman. The stark lighting and strong images of flamenco dance are interlaced with the haunting sounds of a dripping water tap, a squeaking swing and the songs of Maria Dolores Pradera which Ochoa heard throughout her childhood. Beginning with a strong performance in the opening solo, Mario Ismael Espinoza, dressed in high-waisted black trousers and bright red flamenco shoes, led us into the work, teasing us with insights on his masculinity as he flipped between his macho presence and inner insecurities.

The stylish costumes by Diana Ruettiger were cleverly integrated with the underlying concept in the choreography. As the dance progressed, it exposed by laying bare the posturing that occurs in heterosexual relationships as layers of costumes came off and were used as as props, sometimes symbolically and sometimes humorously, but always in a very captivating manner.

In one section, the rhythmic footwork of the Spanish *zapateado* was highlighted first by the five male dancers and then later, by the feet of all the dancers, ablaze in 20 vibrant red shoes, sounding out on the monochromatic stage. In a following section with a gently dejected manner,

the dancers returned humorously limping while wearing just one shoe. The humor continued amid the strong dancing with a kooky cameo of Valecillos incessantly chatting in Spanish on the phone (one of her red high heels).

The strong final image was of Van Woesik, almost hidden in a stack of white flamenco petticoats, looking like a frantic, ruffled bride running amuck between the lines of underwear clad dancers until her laden body tipped over and stuck upside down into ground; yet another relic of doomed sexual exploits.

Danzón, the last work on the program, was choreographed by artistic director Eduardo Vilaro. The danzón is a music and dance form that was introduced to Cuba in the 1700s by colonists where it was influenced by the local African rhythmic and dance styles and became the fusion it is today. This work, which according to the program claims to have “re-invented” the danzón, was a let down.

Perhaps it would have fared better, and the program would have benefited, if this work had been seen earlier in the evening. It didn't have much zip and it lacked the clarity that was seen in the two previous excellent works.

Ballet Hispanico performs again tonight at 8 at the Duncan Theatre, Palm Beach State College, Lake Worth. Tickets: \$45. Call 868-3309 or visit www.duncantheatre.org.