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From Cuba With Love: Ballet Hispanico Honors Palladium's Perez

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Milena Alberti-Perez, global head of corporate finance at Penguin Random House, and David Perez, president of Palladium Equity Partners, on the dance floor at Ballet Hispanico's gala, which honored the couple. Perez is Ballet Hispanico's board president. "It gives me a lot of joy, it enables me to be champion for the Hispanic market -- Ballet Hispanico is an awesome ambassador for the culture."

Photographer: Amanda Gordon/Bloomberg

When David Perez, president of Palladium Equity Partners, first came to New York almost 25 years ago, he went to the Plaza Hotel for a ride from his cousin, a waiter at the landmark property.

On Monday, Perez accepted Ballet Hispanico's Civic Inspiration Award on the stage of the hotel's ballroom, with his cousin among the family sitting at a rose-covered table.

"When you can get within a generation from waiting tables and doing a great job to an honoree here tonight, that speaks a lot about this country and its mobility," said Perez, 46, a native of Cuba.

Praising the contributions of all immigrants, Perez said he "can't wait" for the U.S. to recognize its Hispanic residents, perhaps with a holiday featuring "something tasty instead of a bird." Another suggestion: "our own Ellis Island. How about the Rio Grande National Water Park?"

As for what goes along with being honored by Ballet Hispanico, Perez and 470 guests got a night celebrating Cuba. Girls in bright costumes snapped fans on the dance floor. The Plaza kitchen prepared ceviche, maduros, frijoles negros and short ribs. Perez joked that some of the guests had been lured by the promise of beachfront property under Castro.

Was it as much fun as the party Perez's parents threw in Havana when Ballet Hispanico's professional troupe performed there in November? Almost. Monday's event raised more than \$1.1 million, about 20 percent of Ballet Hispanico's annual operating budget.

Dance Education

Founded in 1970, Ballet Hispanico runs a school teaching ballet, tap and flamenco to about 600 students. It also brings dance education and performances to schools, and maintains a professional dance company, which begins a two-week residency at Manhattan's Joyce Theater on April 14.

Perez first came to New York after graduating from college in Dresden, Germany. He worked as an investment banker, then headed to Harvard Business School and posts in private equity. In 2003, he joined Palladium, where investments focus on the growing U.S. Hispanic market. Its founder is Marcos A. Rodriguez -- son of the retired Plaza waiter.

Perez connected with Ballet Hispanico after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and joined the board in 2002.

"I didn't know much about philanthropy," he said. "In fact, it wasn't at all clear back then whether I should be a receiver or giver of charity. But I'm so glad I

did it. What Ballet Hispanico did for me is open my brain. You had to listen to people, you had to compromise.”

Board President

He helped the organization raise \$8 million to build a new home on the Upper West Side, and currently serves as board president. All three of his children have attended Ballet Hispanico’s school or summer camp.

“We hired and fired,” said Jody Arnhold, the board’s former chairman, recounting her work with Perez. “We redid the budget. We redid the budget. And we redid the budget. Have you seen him salsa?”

Perez showed off his moves toward the end of the evening with his wife and co-honoree, Milena Alberti-Perez, global head of corporate finance at Penguin Random House. She was born in Peru to Chilean parents and came to America when she was 3. As she tells it, she quickly embraced her own Ricky Ricardo after meeting him for a first date (a set-up) at Cuban restaurant Victor’s Cafe.

After dinner, Perez suggested they go downtown or to the Copacabana to dance. “I said the Copa!” recalled Alberti-Perez. “Every man has a secret weapon. That was his. We fell in love dancing.”