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BWW Interview: Ballet Hispánico and Michelle Manzanales Return to The Apollo

by [Juan Michael Porter II](#) [Nov. 13, 2019](#)

On the eve of Ballet Hispánico's return to The World Famous Apollo Theater, I spoke with [Michelle Manzanales](#) who is not only director of the company's school but is also one of the three choreographers being presented during the November 22nd & 23rd engagement. Annabelle Lopez Ochoa and [Andrea Miller](#) join Manzanales on this bill dedicated to "[The Power of The Latina Voice](#)". While I look forward to observing these two world premieres, I am excited beyond words to experience [Con Brazos Abiertos](#) again. I cannot hype this piece up enough; it literally deserves to make the best dance performance list of any year. Having said as much, let's check in with the brilliant mind behind this masterpiece.



Michelle Manzanales choreographing Con Brazos Abiertos
Alona Cohen; photographer

Like many young people, Manzanales was bitten by the dance bug after following her older sister to the dance studio. What started at three years old turned into a

professional career that has included dancing, teaching, répétiteur work, choreographing, and directing.

Teaching came naturally to Manzanales, who remembers, 'as a young person, forcing my cousins to take my dance class in the yard'. From there she dove into creating solos for herself. At nine years old she was appointed a dance assistant by her first teacher and at sixteen was given her first official dance class to teach. This knack for choreographing and teaching served as a source of supplementary income throughout her college years and performing career.

While dancing in Chicago with [Luna Negra Dance Theater](#), founding artistic director [Eduardo Vilaro](#) took notice of her talents and tasked her with working as an unofficial rehearsal mistress. Upon stepping down from dancing full-time, she was appointed the company's Rehearsal Director. In a further show of kismet, after Vilaro was tapped to take over Ballet Hispánico as artistic director in 2009, Manzanales was appointed interim Artistic Director of Luna Negra. Following her year as director, Vilaro asked her to join him in New York as the company's Rehearsal Director. From there she was appointed Artistic Associate with the company and then director of the school. Prior to that appointment she was commissioned to choreograph *Con Brazos Abiertos*, which began as part of [Instituto Coreográfico](#), Vilaro's choreographic laboratory where dance makers of Latin heritage work with the company to workshop new pieces.



Michelle Manzanales
Paula Lobo; photographer

Manzanales:

When it premiered, I was still working as rehearsal director so I got to work with these dancers who I knew so incredibly well. Now that I'm directing the school I'm further detached from the dancers; it's been very interesting going back and talking with them about originality and the intention of things and where the story comes from. I'm lucky that they've all been very open and generous.

There are many different cultures represented within the dancers so what I've found in our conversations, and what I'm hoping the piece does, is communicate the universality of wanting to fit in and wanting to understand where you come from. I share my story and then I open the door for them to find their own connection. It's

been interesting to talk about the Mexican American experience and feeling "other" in both of those communities. But how does that translate to a dancer from Brazil or Cuba?



Workshopping in Instituto Coreográfico
Alona Cohen; photographer

That point is particularly potent during these frighteningly polarizing times with a team of white supremacists in the White House constantly attacking Hispanic communities. I selected the 2017 performance of *Con Brazos Abiertos* at The Apollo as one of that year's best performances for [HuffPost](#) and I stand behind that praise even now, not only for its gorgeous craftsmanship but because of the message of hope that it offers all communities. Happily, the company has been touring the piece across The United States where it is undoubtedly received with relief. The LA Times has described it as '[an exceptional, heart-tugging beauty](#)'. In my mind the dance allows us to grieve what is wrong in our culture even as it opens the door to healing and change. Thank goodness it's returning to The Apollo.



Ballet Hispánico in *Con Brazos Abiertos*
photographer; Paula Lobo

Manzanales:

I love the Apollo! The piece received such a warm welcome before and having it back on this stage with a new cast of dancers is a dream come true. And it's exciting to be

back in this community. At Ballet Hispánico we're always trying to reach different communities. I hope that the audience connects with or is touched by what they see because the most important thing about art is that it allows you a moment to reflect on different topics; to feel or think something and to spark a dialogue afterwards. How exciting is it that when the curtain goes down, a robust conversation comes out of it? That's artists moving the conversation forward.



Dandara Viega in *Con Brazos Abiertos*
Amy Kerwin; photographer

Ballet Hispánico continues to move the conversation forward on November 22 & 23rd, 2019 at The World Famous Apollo Theater. The concert is officially sponsored by **GOYA**. For tickets and additional information, visit ballethispanico.org