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BWW Reviews: Ballet Hispanico Transforms Story Ballet

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Ballet Hispanico ventured into full length story ballet making for the first time last Saturday at the Apollo with Gustavo Ramírez Sansano's *Carmen.maquia*. The sold-out, one night only event retold the story of Carmen, the free spirited and irresistible gypsy who captures the love of the army corporal Don José. Ramírez's minimalist retelling transformed the genre of the full-length narrative ballet, using extreme abstraction and masked movement to attempt what is usually achieved by more elaborate means.

A tormented Don José, as portrayed by [Christopher Bloom](#), opens the piece, moving inconceivably quickly but with the utmost specificity. Though his movement is precise down to his fingertips, his frustration is clear. His motive, however, is not. The piece closes

with the same image, and only then do we realize that the piece begins in Don José's final moments, after he has killed Carmen and her dead body joins Bloom onstage.

Unlike the typical story ballet, *Carmen.maquia* does not rely on costumes to tell us who is a guard, who a gypsy, who a soldier - the movement must, and does, tell us everything we need to know to understand the plot. Though the language Ramírez creates for each type of character succeeds in distinguishing them, all of Ramírez's movement seems to exist within the same strange world. The versatility of Ballet Hispanico's ensemble helps Ramírez to achieve this - they play many parts and maneuver through humorous and nuanced moments with ease and clarity.

Carmen, danced by Kimberly Van Woesik, has many dances of seduction throughout the piece, yet none of them fall into the expected tropes of a gypsy's seduction dance. And still, they are no less seductive than the dances we might expect - Ramírez manages to capture the essence of the characters he choreographs without having them do movement that our eye is trained to associate with these characters. He tackles the codified gestures that plague traditional story ballets similarly - the gestures that dancers use to communicate are mysterious signs to us, but we know that they hold meaning in the world in which they exist.

Though Ramírez's movement is refreshingly unique, it is executed with such speed throughout the piece that it sometimes gets lost to the untrained eye, as if we are trying to understand someone speaking rapidly in a language we have only just learned. Despite the overwhelming quality of the piece's vocabulary, its intricate hand movements, vogue-like undulations, and body slaps are certainly engaging and unexpected.

Two moments stand out and convey the magic of *Carmen.maquia*. In the first, Carmen comes to Don José in a dream, surrounded by the rest of the ensemble. They are all topless, but face their backs to the audience to see Don José, who is all the way upstage. Gender gets lost in the bare backs and androgynous movement of this scene.

The second is the Act 2 duet between Carmen and Don José. The duet mirrors one they have performed in Act 1, involving dangerous, low to the ground partnering tricks that only barely seem to work out in both dancers remaining in control of their bodies. This time, though they attempt the same or similar tricks, they are no longer in sync, no longer play well together. She no longer loves him, so they are no longer capable of the mutual weight sharing required of their physical relationship.

Photo Credit: Paula Lobo