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Ballet Hispanico takes over Bardavon

By Paula Ann Mitchell, Daily Freeman
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POUGHKEEPSIE >> For sure, this isn't your daughter's ballet class.

Nor is it the fairy tale princess stuff that appeals exclusively to little girls.

It is hot, raw, passionate, powerful and evokes a primal feeling through skilled movement and athleticism.

Dozens of vivid adjectives could, in fact, describe Ballet Hispanico, a company founded in 1970 by acclaimed performer Tina Ramirez to explore, preserve and celebrate Latino cultures through dance.



And those who buy tickets to see the nation's premier Latino dance organization at the Bardavon Opera House on March 15 at 8 p.m. are bound to come up with a few of their own.

One thing, though, is almost guaranteed to happen.

Those exiting the theater Saturday might find their pulses raging and their perception of classical dance forever changed.

"Ballet Hispanico is more than a ballet company and much more than a folkloric representation," said Eduardo Vilaro, the artistic director. "Our performances take the audience from the steamy to the sublime."

One of the ways it does that is by providing a glimpse into the diversity in Latino cultures through the creativity of its artists and choreographers, Vilaro said by email earlier this week.

“We present new perspectives rather than represent cultural icons, thus bringing a dialogue of cultural identity to our audiences.

“Many of the ballets are expressions of the fusion found in our Spanish diaspora and some are choreographic celebrations of music and form,” Vilaro added.

“We are focused on creating works of art that transcend the need to coin or box a culture but rather celebrate its richness and intellect.”

The Poughkeepsie performance will feature “Jardi Tancat,” which premiered at the Joyce Theater in New York City last April.

Choreographed by Nacho Duato, the number is based on Catalonian folk tales sung by Maria del Mar Bonet and brings to life the “despair yet hopeful prayers of Spaniards who wait for rain on their barren land,” according to Ballet Hispanico’s press release.

Also on tap at the Bardavon is “Sombrerisimo,” a piece choreographed by Annabelle Lopez Ochoa that has been described as an “absorbing exploration of identity” that makes references to Belgian painter Rene Magritte known for his depictions of men in bowler hats.

Among the other dances the Mid-Hudson audience can expect to see are “Sortuas,” which ponders the “pull of fate in our lives”; and “Asuka,” choreographed by Vilaro, that is a “celebration of the music of Celia Cruz through the lens of the Latino experience,” according to a description posted on the Ulster Performing Arts website, www.upac.org.

There is, of course, much more.

Ballet Hispanico has a diverse repertory of more than 100 works and has performed for about 3 million people in 11 nations and on three continents.

Vilaro, a one-time dancer with the company in the 80s, said he recalls performing in Poughkeepsie and hopes to expand the company’s outreach there.

“This past summer, I was the recipient of a residency at the Rockefeller Estate in Pocantico Hills, and, as part of that residency, we held an outdoors performance on the estate that introduced an excerpt of a new work I was developing as well as repertory favorites,” Vilaro said.

“We also developed some outreach activities in area public schools and are working to partner with other schools in the area with our renowned community arts education programs. It is my hope to continue building a presence in the Mid-Hudson region.”

Naturally, something as feted as Ballet Hispanico has to live up to its reputation by bringing in the best dancers.

Vilaro said the company has 14 featured performers—all of them with a strong classical background but the ability to move in a “very grounded way.”

“By ‘grounded,’ I mean the way a Tango or Flamenco dancer is rooted to the floor. They must also understand modern concepts of precise weight shifts and risk-taking, but above all, I look for strong personalities that jump out at you on stage,” Vilaro said.

“The dancer is thus a very eclectic individual able to move from multiple creative processes and styles.”

Throughout its 43-year history, Ballet Hispanico has garnered exceptional praise and riveting reviews that should be helpful for those considering attending the ballet Saturday night.

The Washington Post called the dancers the “most technically accomplished and musical dancers you’ll find in the contemporary sphere.”

They were further described by the Chicago Sun-Times as “quite simply, stellar in both their stylistic malleability and their ability to create characters...[they’re] gorgeous to look at and thrilling to watch—highly individualistic performers who can shift easily from ballet and modern to a whole range of Latin styles.”

Vilaro is pleased to hear such commentary and hopes the Mid-Hudson audience will be just as captivated.

Like other performances, he predicts that certain dances will draw the greatest audience reactions.

“I would be dishonest if I did not say that the works that connect the audiences to iconic dances such as the Tango or Salsa usually get a strong response from the audience.

“But I have also witnessed how Ballet Hispanico can surprise an audience with unexpected and innovative works that delight and are mind-pleasing.”

Vilaro also has a word or two for those not inclined to go to a ballet, particularly macho guys.

“This is not your ordinary tutu-laced ballet company,” he said. “There is something for everyone at a Ballet Hispanico performance, even for my sports-minded brothers who understand physicality, training and focus. For them, the athleticism of the dancers will be mind-blowing.”