

TROPIC ZONE

Inside choreographer **Rosie Herrera's** surreal take on femininity for **Ballet Hispanico**

The template for dance theater has long been a European one, staked out by experimenters like Pina Bausch. Shaped by her Miami upbringing and Latino background, Rosie Herrera offers a new, intrinsically American vision of the genre. The American Dance Festival has been fostering Herrera's work since 2009, commissioning pieces from her for several summers and presenting her New York City debut last year.

Though she has a BFA in dance performance from the New World School of the Arts, Herrera's dance life includes hip-hop stunts, choreographing for drag houses and dancing on the MTV Video Music Awards. The daughter of a Cuban immigrant father and Nuyorican mother, Herrera, 30, grew up in Hialeah, a Miami-Dade city that's almost entirely Hispanic. Her ease with pop, club and Latino culture animates surreal pieces like *Various Stages of Drowning: A Cabaret*, where a woman in a poufy dress has a horrifying encounter with elaborately frosted cakes, and *Pity Party*, which features a nightclub-heaven sequence.

Herrera drew on a teenage stint as a showgirl in a Little Havana cabaret—strutting in feathered headdresses, acting in salacious skits—to create *Show.Girl.* for Ballet Hispanico, her first major piece for a company besides her own Rosie Herrera Dance Theatre. Jordan Levin spoke to Herrera as she prepared for the Miami premiere. ▶

BY **JORDAN LEVIN**

PHOTOGRAPHY
BY **MORIS MORENO**



Ballet Hispanico's Vanessa Valecillos, Christopher Bloom and Johan Rivera Mendez (kneeling), rehearsing *Show.Girl.*

You were only 16 when you started dancing in a cabaret. What was it like?

It was a huge risk for me. I was crazy shy about my body—a little hip-hop girl with cornrows and Malcolm X glasses. You were in a bejeweled bikini, but there were a lot of powerful female role models. There were all these Cuban jokes and references that were an education for me about my culture. In this context it wasn't about female exploitation, it was about glorification of the female form. You were literally creating a goddess.

How did it affect your dance theater work?

It taught me a work ethic and the basics of being an entertainer. High-quality craft can be transformative. Awareness of the audience is really important to me—to invite them into your process. Cabaret taught me the power of humor and how you can utilize humor to manipulate the audience.

What are you trying to explore in *Show Girl*?

In the context of these cabaret shows the woman is a vehicle to display the costume, to frame other images or situations onstage. They are never the subject of what's happening. If you think about what it means to constantly be framing something in service to something else—that presents an idea about femininity and feminism I find really interesting.

Your pieces can be quite visceral—shocking to some.

Where does that come from?

I'm a surrealist. I can be like a child, very giddy and happy, and I can be very dark. You can't have one side without having the other. It's not something I save for the stage; it's how I see life.

Is Pina Bausch an influence?

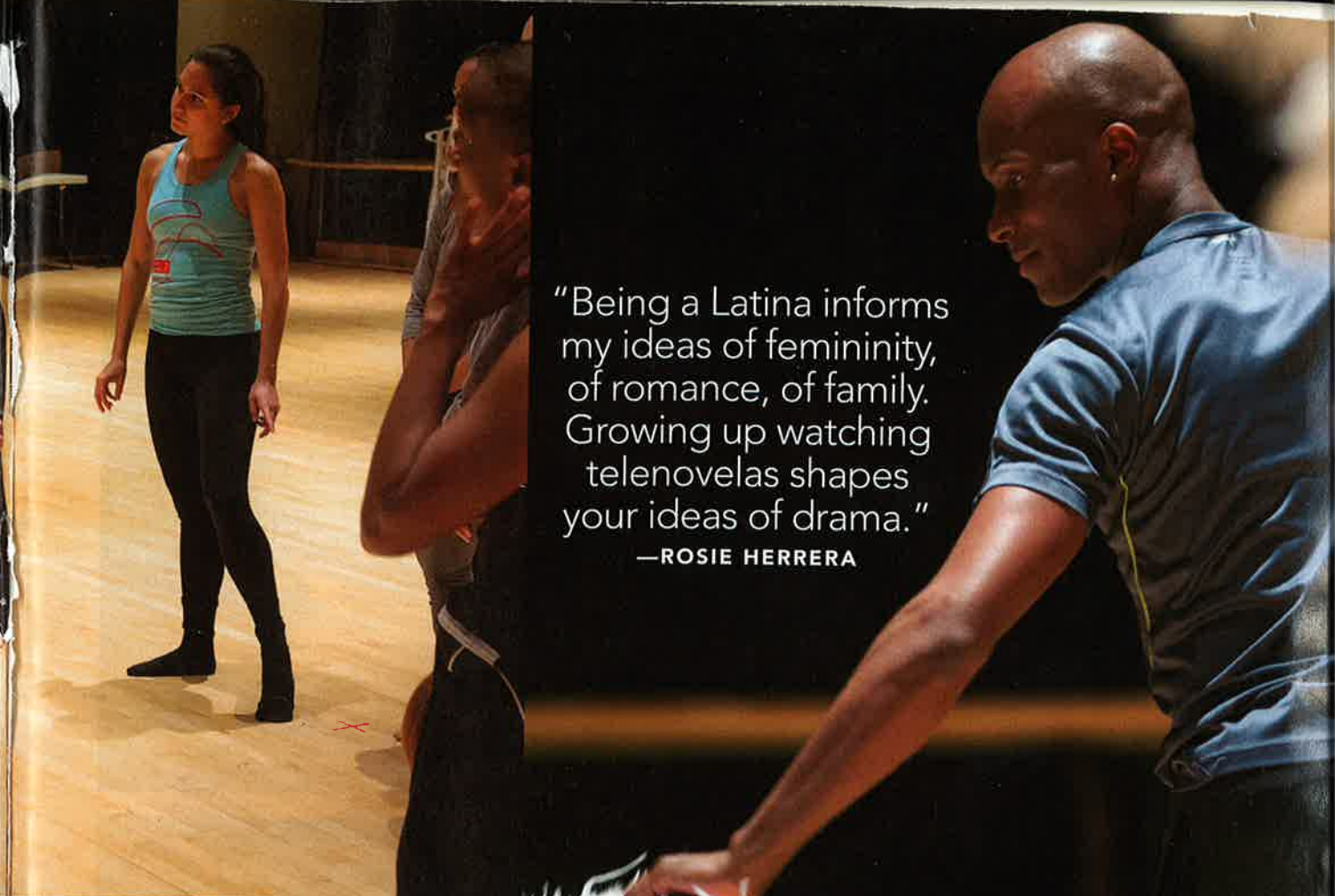
When I was starting to create work at New World, I had long hair, I was doing pieces with gowns and my teacher was like, "You're so Pina, baby." I'm really honored by the comparison. But you could not have two more different people than Pina Bausch, this skinny ballerina from Germany, and Rosie Herrera, a big-booty hip-hop girl from Hialeah. I wouldn't say I'm influenced by her. But I'm grateful because she opened up and redefined the space for what is dance.

What did it mean for you that Ballet Hispanico is a Latino company?

It's like my second home in New York. Everyone speaks Spanish or broken Spanish. One of the things we talked about was how our parents would sing us English lullabies in their bastardized Spanish. The fact that the company focuses on Latino artists is really important because we're such a humongously misrepresented group of people in the U.S. There was an article about one of my films where the reviewer talked about how it depicted my journey coming here on a raft from Cuba. I'm American! I was born here. ■



Herrera, a former showgirl herself, demonstrates a move.



"Being a Latina informs my ideas of femininity, of romance, of family. Growing up watching telenovelas shapes your ideas of drama."

—ROSIE HERRERA



Above: BH's Jamal Rashann Callender. Here and left: "The BH dancers are real pros—they get it, they do it, they're ready to go," Herrera says.