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## Ballet Hispanico at The Apollo

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by William S. Gooch



Images courtesy of Michelle Tabnick Communications

The Metropolitan Opera House, New York City Center, The David Koch Center for the Performing Arts, and even the Brooklyn Academy of Music are all concert venues that are associated with dance. The Apollo Theater is rarely thought of as a performance space for grand jetés, pointe shoes and diaphanous tulle tutus. With a new perspective on presenting an expansive palette for its ever-widening audience, The Apollo has now added concert dance as a must-see event on its annual calendar.

In recent years such esteemed dance companies as American Ballet Theatre, the Dance Theatre of Harlem, and Taylor 2 have kicked off their proverbial heels on the stage that has presented such greats as Duke Ellington, Bills “Bojangles” Robinson, the Nicholas Brothers, Moms

Mabley, Ella Fitzgerald, the Staple Singers, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Michael Jackson, and Patti LaBelle. Add Ballet Hispanico to the list.



“Sombrerisimo” image courtesy of Paula Lobo

For their third, one-night only appearance at the Apollo Theater, Ballet Hispanico presented three works. As a company rich in the tradition of Hispanic culture, artistic director Eduardo Vilaro is taking Ballet Hispanico in a different direction than former founder and artistic director Tina Ramirez. Though the nod to Hispanic culture is still the integral focus of the company, Vilaro is directing the company to include dance works that celebrate the depth and width of the entire Latin traditions, not just Euro-Western Latino culture. The dance triptych presented on Saturday expresses Ballet Hispanico’s more expansive point of view.

From *Umbral*, inspired by the Mexican celebration *Día de los Muertos* (*Day of the Dead*), to the male bravura piece *Sombrerisimo*, to Vilaro’s *Hogar*, Ballet Hispanico has set its focus on finding that delicate balance between finding dance works that expertly combine ballet and modern dance techniques, as well as have audience appeal. The program presented on Saturday almost accomplished that goal.



Images courtesy of Michelle Tabnick Communications. Ballet Hispanico in “Sombriesmo.”

The ballet that came closest to having audience appeal while blending a variety of dance styles was Annabelle Lopez Ochoa’s *Sombrerísimo*. Using a derby hat as a prop has been done on countless occasions. (*Bob Fosse was a genius at winding unique ways to incorporate hats, canes, and gloves into choreography without allowing the prop to be the main focus of the work.*)

Ochoa’s utilizes great partnering for the men in this male *tour de force*. Ochoa also infuses technique from modern dance, ballet, flamenco and lyrical jazz, all while several derby hats are passed back and forth, caught in the air, ricocheted and used as a centerpiece of the choreography. Though *Sombrerísimo* highlights the versatility and technical acumen of Ballet Hispanico’s men, the work is not without humor or lyricism. Jamal Callendar and Mario

Espinosa are the standouts in this work with Callendar setting himself apart as the premier danseur of the company



“Umbral” in rehearsal. Image courtesy of Michelle Tabnick Communications

While *Sombrerísimo* had audience appeal on many levels, Edgar Zendejas’ *Umbral* was mostly cerebral work. Inspired by the Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead, Espinosa in a red leotard and white skeletal make-up was easily identifiable as the death specter. Other than that literal reference, all other references to the Day of the Dead were hard to decipher. Still, there was some good choreography with inventive partnering in *Umbral*. One of the most effective sections was sequence were the Ballet Hispanico women danced topless with their backs to the

audience. Zendejas ingeniously devised movement that spoke to the futility of life and the stark bareness of death without being too literal or kitschy.



“Hogar” in rehearsal. Image courtesy of Michelle Tabnick Communications

Vilaro’s *Hogar* is a dance work that projects Ballet Hispanico into its new vision of itself; a company that references Hispanic culture while incorporating movement styles that go beyond culture and specificity. There was lots of inventive partnering with Vilaro pulling everything suitable from the pyrotechnical lexicon. There was even one section where the men kept one female dancer airborne for an extended period of time that was reminiscent of a similar section in Balanchine’s *Unanswered Question*. If there was one drawback to this debut work were the costumes which though appropriate for the male dancers, had a frumpy effect of their female counterparts.

Overall, this one-day only performance at the historic Apollo Theater was a success. And though Ballet Hispanico is still finding its new voice, with Eduardo Vilaro at its helm and its fine casts of dancers, they will get there!!

—William S. Gooch