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Miami choreographer Rosie Herrera turns life in a Cuban cabaret to art for ‘Show.Girl.’ with Ballet Hispanico



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By Jordan Levin

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Most aspiring dancers and choreographers spend their teens perfecting their arabesques in ballet class or their spins in hip-hop. But when Hialeah-bred Rosie Herrera was 16, she was learning a very different side of dance — as a showgirl strutting the stage of the Little Havana theatrical cabaret Teatro de Bellas Artes in fishnet stockings, high heels, feathered headdress and not much else, backing up drag queens, comedians and middle-aged divas.

“I really got an education as a performer,” Herrera says. “You learn a lot about yourself and the craft doing the same show three to four times a week for months. I had always wanted to dance and perform. I loved the challenge, and the camaraderie felt real to me. I could relate to those people more than my high school friends.”

Now 30, Herrera has drawn on her life in a cabaret for her latest dance theater work, *Show.Girl.*, which she choreographed for New York’s Ballet Hispanico and which will have its premiere when the company performs at the Adrienne Arsht Center this weekend. Its creation was funded by a Princess Grace Award, a prestigious grant given to promising artists from a U.S.-based foundation honoring Princess Grace of Monaco — the former movie star Grace Kelly.

The meeting of showgirls and royalty is no more unlikely than the rest of Herrera’s résumé.

When an ad for dancers shorter than five-foot-five drew the petite Herrera to Bellas Artes, she was an untrained street and club dancer. She performed in rap videos and on the MTV Video Music Awards before studying modern dance at the University of Florida at Gainesville and the New World School of the Arts.

Although she has since become a serious [dance artist](#), creating works commissioned by the American Dance Festival and the Arsht Center, and presenting her company in [New York](#) twice last year, Herrera has never shied away from her club and pop-culture roots. Transvestites, glittering disco balls and pop songs in Spanish and English have all shown up in her [pieces](#), with a sharp sense of how to use camp and showy sentimentality to get at deeper emotions.

A showgirl is often seen as just a couple of barely costumed steps up from a stripper. But Herrera says she found discipline, community and creative spirit at Bellas Artes. “On a spiritual level we were very similar — there was something we all had within us that drew us to art and expression, a vulnerability that I connected with,” she says. “They treated me with great compassion. The women really took me under their wing.”

Ballet Hispanico artistic director Eduardo Vilaro was also attracted by Herrera’s ability to find depth where most people see shallow entertainment. “She really brings out these images that are full of story,” he says. “She has a very unique voice — you don’t hear this voice of the showperson, or the nuances.”

Vilaro was first struck by Herrera’s work after seeing it on video in the late 2000s, when he served on a grant panel for the Miami-Dade County Cultural Affairs Council, and invited her to begin working with Ballet Hispanico in summer 2012. They turned out to have a lot in common.

Vilaro, who is also Cuban-American, was a regular in the downtown and dance club scene growing up in New York — which led to some teasing about their unconventional pasts.

“She says, ‘I know your alter ego — you could do this part,’ and I say, ‘Girl, don’t bring that out — I’m the director of a dance company now,’ ” Vilaro says. But their parallel experiences helped Vilaro understand and respect Herrera’s inspirations.

“She gets into the [depths] of a narrative, a culture — she gets to the guttural level,” he says. “She’s created a piece for us to be a voyeur. She has captured essences of personalities . . . the fears, the stereotypes they deal with. . . . It’s breaking down those past icons and maybe creating newer icons.”

Like similar shows once staged at the Fontainebleau and the former downtown Miami cabaret Les Violins, Bellas Artes (which is still open) presented a Cuban-American version of a classic stage revue, with roots in Las Vegas and the storied nightclubs of pre-Revolutionary Havana. It featured salacious skits, many about the travails of life in Cuba, song-and-dance numbers, and a “Midnight Follies” drag show on weekends.

There Herrera learned practical showbiz skills through Miami’s multicultural filter. Her dance partner, a ballet-trained Colombian man who later became an accomplished drag queen and costume-maker, coached her in classical dance steps and port de bras. She picked up Cuban slang, labored to learn chancletas — a rhythmic dance done in wooden sandals — became “an eyelash expert, a wig expert,” and acquired the tricks of highlighting her cleavage with makeup and adjusting her stockings to boost her behind.

Herrera doesn’t try to recreate a cabaret in *Show.Girl*. (although there will be some sequences involving feathers). Instead, she says, she uses the genre’s images, stereotypes and stagecraft to look at how femininity and masculinity are defined, particularly in Latin culture, and at the relationship between the elevated realm of concert dance and the less-exalted one of entertainment. Herrera seems to see showgirls not as elaborately decorated sex objects — strippers in a feathered and beaded frame — but as female emblems.

“A woman being nude or topless in a costume — it’s really about glorification of the female form, not about hyper-sexualization,” she says. “It’s about using these movements and abstracting them to reveal how ideas of femininity are placed upon us — using this aesthetic to explore these notions of femininity and masculinity. When we use [showgirls] as framing devices, how does it make the women feel?”

The Herrera commission is part of a new era for [Ballet Hispanico](#), which was founded in 1970 and whose profile was long a kind of Latino version of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater — technically accomplished dancers performing a mixed, mainstream modern dance repertory.

Vilaro danced with the troupe from 1985 to 1995, when he left to head his own group, the Luna Negra Dance Company, for 10 years. Since he returned to Ballet Hispanico in 2009 as artistic director, he has focused on building a more distinctively Latino profile for the company, with more Latino choreographers and a more adventurous aesthetic.

“We had a lot of other choreographers come in and say, ‘This is how I see Latino culture,’ ” Vilaro says. “So I was like, ‘Hold on. . . .’ I want us to be an organization that really helps build leaders in the arts. I have made it my business to nurture talent . . . to give voice to Latino artists. You hear Ballet Hispanico, you think you’re going to see a ballet or a folkloric company. Hopefully we start surprising people.”

The company’s Miami program also includes *Sombrerísimo*, a work for six men by Colombian-Belgian choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa commissioned by New York City Center’s Fall for Dance festival; *Sortijas*, a duet by Spanish choreographer Cayetano Soto; and Vilaro’s own *Danzon*, a riff on the elegant Cuban dance. The latter has a contemporary score by famed Cuban jazz musician Paquito D’Rivera, who will perform the music live with his ensemble.

Show.Girl. was co-commissioned by the Arsht Center and the American Dance Festival, which also will present Ballet Hispanico this summer at its festival in Durham, North Carolina. Arsht Center executive vice president Scott Shiller says the project marks several important steps for their relationship with Herrera and for her career.

The piece is the first Herrera has done for a nationally known company and a bigger stage and audience (the Hispanico performance will be at the Ziff Ballet Opera House, while Herrera’s previous shows have been at the Arsht’s Carnival Studio Theater or other small venues). And the center is able to share in the premiere of a distinctively Miami work by a choreographer it has nurtured since 2009.

““We’ve had the opportunity to travel with her and see her hone her craft and . . . define her aesthetic, which I believe is the Miami aesthetic as only Rosie could interpret it,” Shiller says. “The fact that this piece uses the Cuban cabaret aesthetic to explore Latino female identity is an important statement for Rosie as an artist and Miami as a community.”

Herrera, too, is excited to see this prestigious company bring to life her time in this distinctive corner of Miami. “This is a really phenomenal group of dancers,” she says. “It’s a huge departure for me — very different from any work I’ve ever done.”

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