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A ballet director choreographs dance for immigration



Artistic director of Ballet Hispanico Eduardo Vilaro (Photo/Eduardo Patino)

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[Eduardo Vilaro](#) still remembers vividly the experience of immigrating from Cuba to the U.S., at age six, with his parents and two brothers. Ballet wasn't a trade passed down to him by his family, his family was more worried about making ends meet.

“I had an uncle who was a ballet connoisseur, and he exposed me to the arts and took me to the Cuban ballet in New York, and he shared his knowledge with me from Cuba and that was part of my life,” says Vilaro. “I just fell in love with the theatricality and the bravado of the dancers. It wasn’t till 8th grade that I knew I was going to be a dancer. I was asked to dance publically, and I choreographed it myself. I invented it on the spot.”

Today, as the artistic director of [Ballet Hispanico](#) – the nation’s leading Latino dance company – he uses his emotional memories to inspire his choreographies. Saturday will be the world premiere of “Hogar” (“Home”) in New York City’s [Apollo Theater](#). This is Vilaro’s latest choreography, featuring 12 dancers and created with acclaimed Russian composer Lev Zhurbin. It is set to original music around the themes of family, home, and [immigration](#).

[Ballet Hispanico 2013-14](#) from [Ballet Hispanico](#) on [Vimeo](#).

“I’m coming to an age where I am now looking back at this whole madness and surreal thing we call immigration and assimilation and coming into your own, and I thought it was time to reflect on that,” says Vilaro. “It’s not deeply sad, but it’s about feelings and emotions that I have experienced from this process.”

The former ballet dancer says, as an immigrant, the process of migration is something you carry with you for life.

“It’s very surreal,” says Vilaro. “It could be sad, it’s full of challenges – trying to unify yourself and people around you.”

The first generation Cuban-American shares the diverse, yet similar, stories of immigrants through ballet vignettes that tells about experiences involving relationships and even religion.

“Like all works of art, I want the audience to come away with something personal for them – to see the beauty of this company and the aesthetic – but also experience a personal exploration,” says Vilaro. “I decided to use non-Latino music, as myself being a Latino, I am a hybrid of many cultures that have fused...I didn’t want it specific – I wanted it to be open.”

Vilaro became director of the approximately 80 percent Latino dance company in 2009, but he has been a dancer there since 1985. He’s only the second person to lead the company since it was founded by [Tina Ramirez](#) in 1970.

“Tina is a visionary,” says Vilaro about his mentor who he worked with for a decade. “Tina dragged from you your best. She was never satisfied with your complacency. She made you explore yourself in that dance and that was amazing...That’s why Ballet Hispanico has flourished – because she nourished young people, artists and audiences.”

The future for ballet is bright for Latino audiences, according to Vilaro, thanks to the popularity of shows like “So You Think You Can Dance” and “Dancing With the Stars.” Also, Latino dancers are becoming more visible.

“Cuban National Ballet dancers have become major super stars in national ballet companies...[and] it has become more acceptable for men to dance,” says Vilaro. “We are at a place where we are becoming leaders in the dance world, and that’s why we’re here.”

As far as the ongoing immigration debate, Vilaro says he hopes the performance at the Apollo creates more compassion towards immigrants.

“For those of us that are here, we have to understand we are all immigrants – so how do we have the compassion to fold those incoming people into our society, because compassion is key,” says the artist. “For both the immigrants, and the people who live in this country, we are so lucky to be here. It’s always pointing the fingers. If we just point it to ourselves, you can say, I was an immigrant too.”