

Death Interrupted, Just by Making a Phone Call



Ballet Hispanico "Sombrecísimo" was part of the troupe's program at the Apollo Theater.

PAULA LOBO

It always causes a stab of panic — that moment when you're watching a show, and a cellphone goes off. Could it be yours? During an otherwise silent moment in the Ballet Hispanico performance at the Apollo Theater on Saturday, a phone in the audience kept ringing, and Mario Ismael Espinoza, his face painted like a skull from the Mexican Day of the Dead, stopped dancing to hiss in its direction. How awkward.

BRIAN SEIBERT

DANCE REVIEW

As the ringing continued, and other dancers joined Mr. Espinoza in rhythmic hissing, it became apparent that the phone was a plant. What this had to do with the rest of the work was one of several not-very-intriguing questions raised by "Umbral," a premiere by the Mexican-born choreographer Edgar Zendejas.

The paint on Mr. Espinoza's face was the only clear use of the marvelous scenic possibilities in a Day of the Dead dance. Dressed in red, he played an androgynous death figure, inserting himself in various overheated duets and orgies of stretching limbs. He joined the women when they danced topless (with their backs to the audience, covering their breasts when they turned) and was carried overhead by the men. Everyone circled around him as he arched his beautifully pliant back.

Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's "Sombrecísimo," which had its premiere at Fall for Dance in October, improved upon a second viewing. It is a stylish and spirited dance for six men and their hats, and if its misterioso passages convey more mood than meaning, there's brisk invention in its use of haberdashery. With partial success, the work sets up a contrast between the men dancing for themselves — their arms in ballroom position without partners — and their showing off sexily for us. They don't have to remove their button-down shirts to look fantastic. The Apollo audience roared.

It's the fifth piece by Ms. Ochoa, and by far the best, that Ballet Hispanico has presented during the four-year tenure of

Dances for skulls, immigrants and men with hats.

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Eduardo Vilario as artistic director. It displays how skilled a company, especially in the male ranks, he has assembled. These days, there's little technical difference between this troupe and any of the best contemporary repertory ensembles.

That lack of difference is a potential problem. Despite its Mexican theme, "Umbral" is generic in its ribbon choreography and histrionic numbness. Mr. Vilario's premiere, "Hogar," skirted the problem more effectively, ringing changes on the conventions of the rough-love duet and the woman kept aloft by multiple men.

Much help came from the music by Lev Zhurbin (better known as Ljova), played live by five string instrumentalists, including Mr. Zhurbin with two fingers of his left hand in a cast. Sometimes suggesting a hoedown that the tango composer Astor Piazzolla might have written, the score was evocative and danceable, and Mr. Vilario's choreography responded to it fluently.

"Hogar" means "home," but the work was less compelling in its ostensible theme of immigration than in oddities like a Tweedledee and Tweedledum duet for two women. Jamal Rashann Callender, as a Moses figure, was particularly striking. This was Ballet Hispanico's third year performing at the Apollo, and despite the varying quality of the works, the company looked wonderfully at home.

Ballet Hispanico performs on Dec. 5 and 6 at the Kennedy Center in Washington; ballethispanico.org.

memorable and credible performance was of Jessica Andrews's statement of familial pride "Who I Am," which made sense: It's a young woman's empowerment anthem.

Given that, it's odd that the ample songwriting talent assembled for this album — Sarah Buxton, Josh Kear, Gordie Sampson and others — mostly give her songs about cutting loose: "Wild Boy," about someone who "takes you on a ride like a paper airplane in a hurricane," or "Endless Summer," where she throws shade on the path not chosen: "I could have stayed in our hometown, married you and settled down with a picket fence/Would have had a couple kids by now."

At best, this antiseptic and extremely competent album is country by the numbers. Ms. Bradbery has skipped right past the example of early Taylor Swift into choppy waters that her voice, and her mien, don't communicate. Or in other words, she's exactly as she was on "The Voice."

It's no slight to Ms. Bradbery to say that there was more charm in one of Kellie Pickler's imperfect "Idol" performances — say, Bonnie Raitt's "Something to Talk About" — than in all of Ms. Bradbery's rote renditions combined.

Ms. Pickler didn't win "Idol" — she placed sixth on Season 5, in 2006 — but she had five-alarm personality. And while her first album didn't quite fulfill the promise of sass she delivered on "Idol," it proved to be an aberration. Since then, she's matured into herself, releasing a string of strong albums, of which "The Woman I Am" is the latest. Ms. Pickler has some Reba McEntire

to deal with someone else's reality, and he chose well. His Spanish fans will



be gratified. (Destroyer's previous album, "Kaputt," was named the second-best record of the year by the Madrid daily *El País* in 2011.) His fans elsewhere might be introduced to a new band.

Sr. Chinarro, formed in 1990, is from Seville. Mr. Luque is, like Mr. Bejar, a kind of modern folk singer-songwriter working with indie rock, squirrelly and literary, with vague, bright-image lyrics sung in a tired voice. You'll recognize a shared atmosphere. As it happens, they look somewhat alike.

Mr. Bejar's versions of Mr. Luque's songs — "Maria de las Nieves," "Del Monton," "El Rito," "Babiaca," and "Bye Bye" — are a little more down at the heels than the Sr. Chinarro originals, but they're honest covers of lovely songs, sung with care. There's even a serious approximation, by Nicolas Bragg, at a surf rock meets Neil Young guitar solo on "Babiaca."

This could be a gateway record for someone curious about Destroyer, even more so for those who know Spanish: As he pays homage to a peer, Mr. Bejar eases up on his distancing effect.

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