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Brazilian, Dance

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Review: Ballet Hispanico answers the question “If Walls Could Speak”

Ballet Hispanico presented its first evening-length commission, the world premiere of Fernando Melo’s “If Walls Could Speak” at the Apollo Theater on November 20, 2015. Melo is a Brazilian choreographer based in Sweden who has an international career and reputation.

Ballet Hispanico is billed as America’s leading Latino dance company and proved it with this performance. It is not because they are folkloric. Ballet Hispanico has done that with “Club Havana.” It’s not because they rework European traditions as in the Company’s

“Carmen.MAQUIA.” Ballet Hispanico is America’s leading Latino dance company because they are creating the future, a bright future that is Latin and essentially American at the same time.

Melo spent two months in New York City choreographing the piece with the Ballet Hispanico dancers. He created a strong piece that captures the energy, loneliness, and stresses of contemporary urban life in a way we’ve never seen before. His choreography also leveraged the emotional storytelling strengths of the Ballet Hispanico dancers.

During the process Melo told New York Latin Culture, “As a Brazilian choreographer, it was very important for me to avoid any kind of cultural stereotype that is related to my country. There is much more that we can explore outside of samba, carnival, football, the beach, and our natural resources... At the same time, it was essential for me to bring to the audience a poetic work that expresses what it really means to be Brazilian today.”

That statement made us curious how Melo and Ballet Hispanico would create a work that was not Brazilian, yet was Brazilian at the same time.

“If Walls Could Speak” opens with a live band of percussionists. This is important because dancers always tell us that it is the music that moves them. The rhythms of Latin America come from different parts of Africa and are sweetened with various blends of European and Indigenous flavor. Brazilian rhythms give us Brazilian dance. Most of the movement wasn’t overtly Brazilian, but the ideas were.

The dancing opens with one dancer and a table, a metaphor for the Latin family. The back wall is a mirror that reflects the audience onto the stage. The entire audience is there on the wall, yet the dancer is completely alone and anxious about it. He tries to use a phone on the table, but things aren’t working.

He expresses the kind of loneliness you experience inside a hotel room when you are traveling alone on business, are away from your family, or have just broken up with your love.

This is the Brazilian concept of “Saudade,” the heartfelt longing for loved ones at a distance. Brazil is a huge country. If you go to find work in the cities, you are separated from your birthplace and family. If you live or work in another country, it is even worse. When we mentioned “saudade” to Melo after the performance, he said, “that is my life.”

Then in a brilliant piece of staging, the walls begin to speak. We start to see through the mirrored wall to another table surrounded by people. It’s not clear whether this is a scene in the room next door, or in the dancer’s mind.

The metaphor of being surrounded by people and yet completely alone begins to play out. We can see or imagine others having a good time. This is something New Yorkers know about.

It’s also a metaphor for social tension. In both New York City and Brazil, there is a huge gap between those who have and those who don’t. Luxury and good times are visible all around on the streets, in windows, and on the internet, but you may only be able to watch them.

In front of the wall, behind the wall, in both places at the same time, the choreography begins to fragment into a multiplicity of meaning. We begin to see all sides of a thought as in a Cubist painting. The performance recalls Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges' short story the "Library of Babel." This library contains every possible combination of a set of books. In a similar way, "If Walls Could Speak" shows many possible combinations of an emotion.

There is occasional humor. The audience laughed when the same dancer repeated his walk from stage left to stage right several times as if through some magic trick or a stuttering video.

Melo and Ballet Hispanico express the stresses of the City, the urbanization that is going on around the world. The tension of urban competition sometimes explodes into violence. Dancers fighting each other in the rush to get ahead carried a hint of capoeira, the Brazilian dance form that was an Afro-Brazilian martial art disguised as dance so it would be allowed.

A line of dancers moving together like a fish in the sea or a many-armed Shiva god made a beautiful image. It was a very contemporary Latin version of the kaleidoscope of arms and legs expressed so wondrously in Balanchine's masterpiece "Apollo."

Cubism is the obvious reference, but "If Walls Could Speak" was more Futurist, or Cubism in motion. Whereas a hundred years ago Italian Futurism glorified machines and war, Melo's contemporary Futurist vision focuses on Ballet Hispanico's strength: passionate expression. Whether the movements were abstract or lyrical, the Ballet Hispanico dancers always extended them to the audience with passion.

Several times during the performance I looked back over the Apollo Theater crowd. Every time I saw the same expression: wide-eyed, mouth-opened wonder.

As the piece closes, the solitary dancer finds love or at least the thought of it back at the table.

Fernando Melo's "If Walls Could Speak" brought Ballet Hispanico to a new stage of choreographic brilliance delivered with passionate expression. It is not like anything the Company has done before.

The excellence of the choreographer and Company's work is a metaphor for what is happening in Latin communities across the United States. We are working hard to earn our seat at the table. At the same time, we offer you a passionate invitation to have a seat at ours.

Bravo! I can't wait to see what Ballet Hispanico does next.