

Ballet Hispánico returns to Philadelphia

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Ballet Hispánico performs Friday and Saturday at the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, returning to Philadelphia for the first time in nearly two decades. (PAULA LOBO)



GALLERY: The 15-person Ballet Hispánico company has dancers... (PAULA LOBO)
By Nancy G. Heller, For The Inquirer

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It's not an obvious career path: Eduardo Vilaro has gone from starring in a middle school production of *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* to becoming an award-winning choreographer and director of an internationally celebrated, New York City dance troupe currently celebrating its 45th anniversary. This

Friday and Saturday, Vilaro will be at the helm of Ballet Hispánico when it makes its first Philadelphia appearance in nearly two decades, at the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts.

Since its founding by Tina Ramírez in 1970, Ballet Hispánico has been a force to be reckoned with. It had its own dance school from the beginning, emphasizing its close connection with the local Latino community and training students in a wide variety of techniques and styles. The company quickly became a fixture at major U.S. venues and toured in Europe and South America. Today, Ballet Hispánico boasts a junior company (BHdos), newly expanded studio facilities, a Choreographic Institute, and workshops in everything from ballet to Latin social dance.

In a recent telephone interview, Vilaro discussed his long-standing relationship with Ballet Hispánico, his respect for Ramírez, and his love of dance. Born in Havana, Cuba, Vilaro came to the United States with his family at the tender age of 6. Growing up in the South Bronx, he quickly learned English - "thanks to public TV," he says - and discovered his love for the performing arts, attending opera and ballet concerts on Sunday afternoons with an arts-loving uncle.

Vilaro discovered his true vocation when an eighth-grade teacher cast him as Linus in the school musical and asked him to create that character's solo dance. "I was hooked," Vilaro recalls. Because it wasn't acceptable for Latino boys to study dancing, he told his parents he wanted to learn martial arts, then secretly attended the ballet class in the studio next door.

Eventually, Vilaro became a successful performer/arts administrator, and earned two degrees in dance. While working on his master's at Columbia College in Chicago, he founded Luna Negra Dance Theater, where he was artistic director for a decade, producing more than 20 new works and inviting other Latino choreographers to create additional pieces for the troupe. He also started winning awards.

In 2009 came the opportunity to succeed Ramírez at Ballet Hispánico, where he had been a principal dancer, in his adopted hometown. This allowed him to build on what Ramírez had begun. Vilaro says he values his time dancing for her: "Tina started it all. She was the match that ignited the fire, and I was one of the embers that took it further." Touring with the ballet brought him "out of the Bronx, and into the world," exposing him to new countries, foods, and customs, and reinforcing the thrill of performing for diverse audiences.

A popular guest teacher and lecturer, these days Vilaro's a busy man, so busy that he no longer has much time for choreography. Still, he maintains, "Nurturing is what's really important." He is justifiably proud of the 600 children currently enrolled in Ballet Hispánico's school. He's also focused on continuing the company's original mission: to provide educational and cultural opportunities for the local Latino community, and also to demonstrate and celebrate the richness and diversity of Latino cultures.

Stressing the danger of stereotypes, Vilaro notes that the current 15-person company consists of dancers from all over the United States, plus Europe and five Spanish-speaking nations. He chooses guest choreographers whose work will expand his troupe's physical abilities and encourage "thought-provoking discussions" among performers and audiences alike.

Ballet Hispánico's extensive repertory allows Vilaro to choose varied programs that he hopes will appeal to and challenge viewers in different cities. The forthcoming Annenberg show consists of short works by three Latino choreographers.

First on the bill is *Sombrerismo*, by Colombian Belgian artist Annabelle López Ochoa. "Until she worked with me," Vilaro says, she "had never explored her Latino side." As the title suggests, hats - specifically, bowler hats - figure prominently in this work, which Vilaro describes as "fun and athletic," with references to a painter representing the other side of the choreographer's family tree: the Belgian surrealist René Magritte.

In 1998, Catalan choreographer Ramón Oller created *Bury Me Standing*, concerning the lives of Spanish gypsies. Performed to traditional flamenco music, the piece refers to an old gypsy saying: "Bury me standing . . . because I've been on my knees all my life." Vilaro says this work was first performed by Ballet Hispánico almost 20 years ago. Vilaro and Oller agreed the costumes and staging needed updating, so Philadelphians will see a refreshed version.

The evening will end with *Flabbergast*, described by one critic as a "full-blown delight." This piece, Vilaro proudly asserts, launched the career of Gustavo Ramírez Sansano, another Spanish choreographer - from Valencia. As Vilaro describes it, this "fast, gestural, humorous" piece evokes the immigrant experience: "When you come to this country," he says, "you're flabbergasted!"

Nancy G. Heller writes about dance for The Inquirer.

DANCE

Ballet Hispánico

8 p.m. Friday;

2 and 8 p.m. Saturday.

Zellerbach Theatre, 3680 Walnut St. **Tickets:** \$20-\$50. **Information:** 215-898-3900 or www.annenbergcenter.org.