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Miami choreographer Rosie Herrera's 'Show.Girl.' premieres



Members of Ballet Hispanico in the premiere of Rosie Herrera's "Show.Girl."

Photos by Daniel Azoulay / Courtesy of the Adrienne Arsht Center

By Jordan Levin

jlevin@miamiherald.com

Show.Girl., Rosie Herrera's new piece for New York's Ballet Hispanico, is very different from the vivid, surreal works we've previously seen from this Miami dance maker. Herrera's first commission for a major company, which premiered Friday night at the Adrienne Arsht Center, is more restrained, conceptual and opaque, more dependent on abstract movement, instead of images, to communicate its ideas. There are strong moments, notably a sequence in which dancer Vanessa Valecillos becomes a universal female emblem amid a cloud of white feather fans.

Herrera tried to do something new in Show.Girl., and to subvert the expectations created by the title and the piece's inspiration in her teenage experience performing in a Little Havana cabaret. But the result often feels like a set of conceptual and theatrical exercises — drained of the sense of unpredictability and wild imagination that can make Herrera's work so richly unnerving.

Show.Girl. opens in silence, with six women in Diana Ruettiger's sleek, pale dresses mechanically doing preening, clichéd gestures of female allure or anxiety. They slide their hands down their legs, pat their faces, arch back in a way that should be provocative but just looks

discouraged. To sultry disco-funk by Earth Wind and Fire, they perform a flashy dance number, all sexy hip rolls and layouts, ending with a cheesecake pose and frozen smile.

They follow with a verbal litany of acquiescence and anxious need. “Can I get you anything?” “Tell me that you love me!” accompanied by sometimes aggressive or sarcastic gestures. “Cream? Sugar?” they ask, pressing their hands to breast and crotch. Speeding through more sexy poses, they shout a comically tangled chorus of questions — “Who’d she marry? Why’d he kill her?” — about a telenovela. Seemingly unable to wrestle meaning from these female formulas, they end by convulsing and whipping their hair, while melodramatic spaghetti western music mocks their frustration. Herrera seems to want to evoke a sense of entrapment and emotional turmoil lurking in prescribed female roles. But by also mocking those roles as clichés, Herrera mostly robs them of their power, or to give us a sense of how they really work.

What follows seems to belong to a different dance. Amid clouds of dry ice and the saccharine swell of 10cc’s *I’m Not in Love*, five white-clad men flutter giant white feather fans around Valecillos, a cabaret angel in a silver dress. They frame her like Venus de Milo in a feathered shell; lift her high above a trembling cloud; stroke her caressingly, then with overwhelming speed — while Valecillos seems alternately exalted and desperate. The lush, pop-referential imagery and discomfiting slide from comic to ominous are typical Herrera — and much more powerful than the abstracted section before. *Show.Girl.* ends with the other five women, in gleaming beaded bikinis under a floating cloud of glitter, undulating in slow motion to shimmering harp music. Whether they’re exalted in burlesque heaven or trapped in a shiny sexist purgatory is unclear.

The Herrera commission is part of Ballet Hispanico artistic director Eduardo Vilaro’s effort to push the company in a new, more adventurous direction, and two other works, commissioned last year, boded well for that effort. Annabelle Lopez Ochoa’s engaging *Sombresismo*, for six men to a mélange of music including tango, salsa, flamenco and classical Spanish guitar, cleverly riffs on surrealist painter Rene Magritte’s images of men in bowler hats. The men slid through adroitly flashing, gymnastic patterns, evoking partnership, play, and competition, to more eerie and isolated moments. Lauren Alzamora and Jamal Rashann Callendar gave a compelling performance of Cayetano Soto’s short duet *Sortijas*, to a wrenching song by Lhasa de Sela, with arching, split-legged leaps and strange interactions (Callendar pushes his hand into Alzamora’s face) that made *Sortijas* coolly erotic and enigmatic by turns. Joshua Preston’s striking lighting designs vividly emphasized the shifting visual and dramatic mood in both pieces.

Vilaro’s own *Danzon*, despite the treat of a lively onstage performance by clarinetist Paquito D’Rivera and his five-member ensemble, was the most conventional of the evening, with the full 14-member company in a twirly, pretty and utterly generic jazz and modern dance blend

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