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Ballet Hispanico In the foreground from left, Mario Ismael Espinoza, Min-Tzu Li and Joshua Winzeler in "El Beso" ("The Kiss") by Gustavo Ramírez Sansano on Tuesday during the company's season at the Joyce.

In a Choreographer's Imagination, a Kiss Is Never Just a Kiss

When Eduardo Vilaro took the job of the artistic director of Ballet Hispanico in 2009, he left the company he had founded in Chicago, the Luna Negra Dance Theater, in the hands of the

**SIOBHAN
BURKE**

**DANCE
REVIEW**

Spanish choreographer Gustavo Ramírez Sansano. Five years later, with Luna Negra having folded, Mr. Vilaro and Mr. Sansano have crossed paths again. On Tuesday at the Joyce Theater, Ballet Hispanico unveiled its first commission for Mr. Sansano, "El Beso," which was also his New York debut as a choreographer.

The Chicago press often praised Mr. Sansano for his audacious work, and justifiably so, if this propulsive piece is a

representative sample. "El Beso," which toys with variations on the kiss — romantic, platonic, relished, relinquished, dodged — has its share of cute, gimmicky fun. But it is also full of bold, astute, unexpected choices, from the absurdity of its bombastic music (a medley of circa 1900 Spanish composers, including Amadeo Vives and Tomás Bretón) to the velocity, variety and intricacy of Mr. Sansano's movement. Even when you can see the punch line coming, the delivery makes it worth waiting for.

Ballet Hispanico continues through April 27 at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street, Chelsea; 212-242-0800, joyce.org.

"El Beso" begins in darkness with an orchestral swell portending something big. Alas, the lights come up on no one but a dazed Johan Rivera Mendez, looking small in shorts, socks and a tank top beneath Luis Crespo's hovering circular tapestry. (More fanciful costumes are to come: pleated and cutaway creations that move gorgeously with the dancers, billowing around their sinewy frames, by the Venezuelan designer Angel Sanchez.) Once he sputters into motion, like an engine revving up the piece, motion never ceases until the end, when he finds himself alone again.

In the intervening episodes, other dancers burst onto the scene, in couples or small groupings or en masse. At one point a kind of organismal cluster shuf-

fles its way across the stage — limbs reaching out to touch other limbs — as if trying to keep itself from flying apart. Every manner of kiss — cheek, air, French — inserts itself into Mr. Sansano's choreography, with its crooked lines and jittery gaits and calligraphic flourishes. Joshua Preston's lighting cuts in and out at curious times as the victorious music keeps on going.

"Somberrísimo," created last year by Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, was similarly explosive in its exploits for six men in crisp button-down shirts and black bowler hats. (Diana Ruettiger designed the costumes.) Those hats get traded and tossed, amassed on a single head or discarded on the floor, as the dancers dive into handstands or slink through

salsa moves. Their world, while inviting, remains somehow impenetrable; while we know these are fierce dancers, "Somberrísimo" reveals little more about them.

The sinister undertones in "Somberrísimo" echoed the first piece on the program, Edgar Zendejas's "Umbral" (the Spanish title means "threshold"), inspired by Mexican Day of the Dead traditions. The most irksome part of this brooding piece is a topless section for the women, who keep their breasts covered with their hands or arms, which makes them look weirdly ashamed. Why do that?

It might be time to lay "Umbral" to rest. But let's see more from Mr. Sansano soon.