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Ballet Hispanico Brings Machismo To The Joyce

By Walter Rutledge

Ballet Hispanico presented their two-week New York City season at the Joyce Theater, Tuesday, April 15 through Sunday, April 27. The enterprising season featured four different programs over fourteen performances. The Program A featured two Joyce Theater premieres, *Umbral* by Edgar Zendejas and *Sombrerísimo* by Annabelle Lopez Ochoa; and a world premiere *El Beso* by Gustavo Ramirez Sansano.

The first thing that becomes strikingly evident is the company's strong roster of male dancers and their dominant role in the present



repertoire. There is bravura and an unabashed machismo that exudes from the male performers; and to the credit of Artistic Director Eduardo Vilaro, the persona doesn't come across as a theatrical facade. Instead the dancers exude a confidence and comfort in the choreography.

Umbral by choreographer Edgar Zendejas draws the audience into the ethereal world surrounding the beloved Mexican celebration Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). The holiday focuses on gatherings of family and friends to pray for and remember friends and family members who have died. Although Dia de los Muertos coincides with the Catholic holiday called All Soul's and All Saint's Day, the indigenous people have combined this with their own ancient beliefs of honoring their deceased loved ones.

Jamal Callender and Joshua Winzler open the work, they share the stage with a motionless group of dancers, who sit with their backs turned. The encounter is more of a shared experience than a traditional duet. The imagery shifts from comforting and supportively sharing body weight, to haunting and surreal as Winzler muffles Callender's silent screams.

As the dance moves from duet to octet the quality shifts to weighted movement working through deep second position plies and lunges. The sound of heels dropping to the floor in unison produce a heart-stopping thud. Joshua Preston striking lighting creates a cavernous eerie subterranean world. The ideal place to be introduced to the white faced skeletal figure of death performed with great intensity by Mario Ismael Espinoza.

Espinoza's long thick curly hair, high/lifted upper torso deportment and commanding presence were reminiscent of former Bejart principal dancer Jorge Donn. The treatment of the abstract narrative, combined with the rich use of symbolism and imagery presented a decidedly European aesthetic. Two such sections are a movement for six men, and a section for the female ensemble.

A ring cell phone interrupted Espinoza's solo. He walked to the edge of the stage and shushed the "offender", as the ringing continued the audience also became annoyed and a few people vocally supported Espinoza. When a group of five male dancers joined him on stage to assist in chastising the person it became clear the audience had been duped. The section that followed was a fluid and lyric section with the male ensemble moving Espinoza in a series of lifts and supported movements.



When the ensemble women danced with Espinoza they stripped to the waist, dancing in place with their backs to the audience. Eventually they began to move across the stage; and strategically

placed hands or arms kept them covered and chaste. The section had a cleverly designed enticing “peek-a-boo” effect.

Sombrerísimo by choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa was a delightful up-tempo dance for five men, capturing the company’s credo of empowered male dancing. Christopher Bloom, Jamal Rashann Callender, Alexander Duval, Mario Ismael Espinoza and Johan Rivera Mendez expressed a bravado and unabashed male bonding through the guise of their hats. The ensuing dance featuring acrobatic tableaux, group lifts and partnering, and individual movement statements sprinkled with Latin social dance. With to a copulation of music by various artists including Banda Ionica featuring Macaco el Mono Loco and Titi Robin *Sombrerísimo* moves with an ease of an uptown ballroom.

Inspired by the surreal Belgian artist René François Ghislain Magritte, who famous images of men in bowler hats began with his 1926 painting *The Musings of a Solitary Walker*. In Magritte’s work the symbolism of the hat in many of his work is shared identity. Ochoa uses the hats to create unity while establishing to dancers individuality.



The world premiere of *El Beso* by Spanish choreographer Gustavo Ramirez Sansano closed the program. The work was dedicated the many variations of a kiss, and he approached the task with a combination of charm, passion and humor. After an orchestral fanfare Johan Rivera Mendez opened the work with

a simple walk down stage, his ensuing solo responded to the pizzicato music with quick, crisp, tight movement that resonated through his entire body. Sansano used this section to establish the work’s pacing and introduce the style for the group sections that would be reintroduced in the latter part of the ballet.

The opening encountered featured an aggressive Kimberly Van Woesik and a restrained Mendez. Mendez fended off Woesik’s overt advance with considerable gentlemanly diplomacy and the dismissive kiss was affectionate but clearly platonic. The encounters that followed ran the osculatory gamut.

The centerpiece of the work was an unexpected encounter between Christopher Bloom and Jamal Callender. The interlude began upstage of a giant fringed shawl. The triangle corner of the shawl fell behind the proscenium, and the fringe cleverly divided the stage into two rooms creating the illusion of a bearded curtain. Callender and Winzeler eventually moved from the upstage room to the space in front of the fringe/curtain choreographically changing their encounter for the audience from mysterious to personal.

With a fixed intensity Callender walked downstage on the diagonal and literally “lip locked” Bloom. Sansano was able to make this an artistic and passionate moment that was more titillating than salacious. Callender, an artist of considerable depth, and Winzeler also deserve credit for their interpretation, which could have easily slipped into melodrama or camp.

Sansano returned to his original movement impetus for a rousing finale the economically capturing the energy of the coda. Mendez also repeated his opening promenade signaling the end of the work. In the hands of a less experienced choreographer this would have been predictable and, therefore, anti-climatic; here it was a welcomed and appropriate concluding moment.

It is worth repeating that over the last three seasons, under Vilaro’s stewardship, the company has moved in an exciting new direction. This Ballet Hispanico has become an ambassador of the Latino experience, focusing more on the culture and heritage of people of Spanish decent from the Western hemisphere. The company now is a technically proficient modern dance ensemble with strong balletic undertones, giving them the prowess to speak in many choreographic dialects.