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STAGE & ARTS

## Review: Ballet Hispanico offers playful night of hats and Havana hotness

REVIEW: New York's Ballet Hispanico presented a high-energy program of Latin-inspired dance.

By **CAROLINE PALMER** Special to the Star Tribune

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© PAULA LOBO *Melissa Fernandez and Mario Ismael Espinoza in "Club Havana," the climax of Thursday's performance by Ballet Hispanico.*

Ballet Hispanico turned up the heat at the Ordway in St. Paul on a chilly Thursday night. The 45-year-old New York troupe showed off its signature repertory informed by the dance and music of Latin America and Spain.

The energetic evening began with an ode to smooching and concluded with a swinging nightclub scene straight out of Havana. “El Beso” (2014), choreographed by Gustavo Ramírez Sansano, is set to Spanish zarzuela music, a genre similar to musical theater with a flair for the dramatic or comedic, depending on the story line.

Sansano tends toward a playful approach (quick pecks or loud smacks), and he also gives special focus to more passionate encounters as the dancers seamlessly shift from one lip lock to another.

On Thursday the performers were at their most compelling during the work’s intimate duets, alternately taunting and succumbing to one another’s charms. Eventually all of the 15 company members joined in a grand finale, but the quieter sensual sections of the work lingered like the memory of a first kiss.

Ballet Hispanico’s performance of Annabelle Lopez Ochoa’s “Sombbreroismo” earned acclaim during the 2015 International Dance Festival in Cuba. The clever work draws inspiration from painter René Magritte, who regularly featured men in bowler hats in his creations, but it brings the imagery into the present by subtly examining masculine stereotypes.

The all-male cast slinked and slid against a shadowy background like film noir romantic leads. What could have been a tiresome gimmick — the ever-present hats — morphed into something more innovative when the dancers tossed and caught them as part of the tightly crafted choreography.

The performers gave a nearly flawless effort (only one chapeau went awry) as they simultaneously celebrated and poked fun at the trappings of masculinity.

“Club Havana” (2000), choreographed by Cuban native Pedro Ruiz, offered up a slice of classic nightlife set to conga, rumba, mambo and cha-cha rhythms. The dancing was as smooth as a fresh cocktail, but the work really hit its stride when the performers showed off their individual virtuoso talents, their feet moving as quickly as the ever-shifting beats. Acrobatic partnering took center stage with overhead lifts that transformed floating into flipping.

The work likely inspired more than a few audience members to book a vacation to Cuba, now that it’s becoming increasingly easier to do so.

Caroline Palmer is a Twin Cities dance critic.