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Preserving Hispanic Culture Through Dance

A Sneak Peek at Ballet Hispanico's 26th New York Season

By

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Vice President for Global Communications at Ford Foundation Marta Tellado, center left, and Artistic Director of Ballet Hispanico Eduardo Vilaro, pose with company dancers from Ballet Hispanico at the organization's 2014 gala, held Monday. Andrew Lamberson for The Wall St

Ballet Hispanico's 26th New York Season kicks off on Tuesday, but guests at its gala earlier this week got a sneak peek of what's to come when the 14-person company performed an excerpt from "El Beso," a piece by Spanish choreographer Gustavo Ramirez Sansano. The dancers—the majority of whom have Hispanic backgrounds—wore costumes designed by Venezuelan designer Angel Sanchez.

It was all rather fitting for the 43-year-old Upper West Side cultural institution, whose mission is to celebrate and preserve Hispanic culture through dance. Mr. Sanchez said that dance, like fashion, is a wonderful way to express Latin passion.

"In ballet and in fashion, you can be out there," he said. "You can show who you are without any restraint. As Latin artists, even when we try and take out that 'cha-cha factor,' it comes through."

There was plenty of that "cha-cha-cha" factor at the upbeat event at the Plaza Hotel—spirited flamenco and hip-hop style performances from Ballet Hispanico students and a let-your-hair-down dance component for dancers and amateurs alike.



Ballet Hispanico dancers giving a preview of 'El Beso' at the 2014 Ballet Hispanico gala. Andrew Lamberson for The Wall St

The event raised more than \$1 million and, during the festivities, a Ballet Hispanico board member and representative from the Ford Foundation—which was honored for its longtime support of the group—announced that an additional \$1.5 million grant was being given for capital renovations. The funds will establish a reserve fund and to support Instituto Coreográfico, a lab for emerging choreographers created by Artistic Director Eduardo Vilaro in 2009.

Ballet Hispanico's approach is a holistic one. Nearly 700 students are currently enrolled in its School of Dance (where children can take classes in ballet, flamenco, hip-hop and more), and almost a quarter receive scholarships. The group's outreach programs have reached 15,000 children and adults through the years.

"We've become extremely relevant because of the changing demographic," said board chair Kate Lear. "We're acting more and more as a cultural connector, as people want to know who their neighbors are, and who the people who are moving next door really are."

Melissa Fernandez, a dancer of Cuban descent who grew up in Miami, discovered Ballet Hispanico after graduating from Julliard.

"It intrigued me how I could tie in my culture and my passion for dance," she said. "The organization empowers the Hispanic community in New York City and all over the country when we travel."

For some of the dancers, it is a real blessing to be based in a city (and in a company) where dancing is so well respected and where the idea of becoming a professional dancer is encouraged. Johan Rivera Mendez left Puerto Rico to study dance in Miami because there were no formal programs available to him at home.

"You have no idea how great it feels to tell the kids who study at Ballet Hispanico and love it that it is OK to risk everything and become a dancer," said Mr. Rivera Mendez.

And, since many of the dancers in Ballet Hispanico's company are from Latin American countries, or at least from Hispanic backgrounds, Mr. Rivera Mendez says there is an instant bond between them.

"This company is like a family," he said.



Ballet Hispanico School of Dance performers. Andrew Lamberson for The Wall St