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## Ballet Hispanico whisks us away to contemporary dance's hottest spot



(Paula Lobo) - Jamal Rashann Callender and Vanessa Valecillos danced "Danzon" with Cuban jazz clarinetist Paquito D'Rivera and his ensemble onstage at Ballet Hispanico's mixed repertory program at the Kennedy Center. In its first return to the venue in six years, the troupe presented fierce duets, a piece about a blind man and even a hat-tossing caper.

**By Rebecca Ritzel**

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Modern dance might be a 20th-century American art form, but contemporary dance — at this 21st-century moment — is in many ways an Iberian one. Which is to say, many choreographers who are crisscrossing the continents these days are of Spanish or Latin American descent. Put four of them together on one wide-ranging program, as Ballet Hispanico did Thursday night at

the Kennedy Center, and you start to wonder whether the bridge between modern dance and ballet starts at the Rock of Gibraltar.

The versatile Ballet Hispanico dancers were exquisite, whether performing as tango club dancers or Catalanian peasants.

The program opened with a brief suite that you could argue kicked off Spain's international dance dominance. "Jardi Tancat" is a 1983 work by Nacho Duato, the choreographer who led his country's national dance company from 1990 until 2011. The piece is set to a series of mournful ballads, and the female dancers fan out long, full skirts as they are lifted by the men or kneel prostrate in communal prayer. The dance is about the rhythms of life, death and love in a Catalan village, and the latter is conveyed well by Alexander Duval and Min-Tzu Li in a poignant final duet that includes both celestial lifts and earthy somersaults.

Empathy for the human spirit, particularly for the female spirit, is something you don't always find in works by Cayetano Soto, one of Duato's younger contemporaries. See one piece and you'll find him darkly fascinating; see two, and you wonder what this choreographer's deal is with men dominating women (and how, exactly, does he teach men to lift women by the crotch in rehearsals?). "Sortijas," a 2013 Ballet Hispanico commission, is a fierce duet performed by Lauren Alzamora and Jamal Rashann Callender. He was shirtless, she wore a black socks and a fuzzy silver sweater over a leotard like she was doing aerobics circa Christmas of 1983.

Odd costuming aside, the piece was intriguing, set to a husky adagio for guitar and a female vocalist singing about the romantic choices of blind man. The piece is divided into three sections by two blackouts. There's one tangled pas de deux, one solo section where the dancers separate and mimic a cat fight, and a finale danced by Alzamora with Callender's hand covering her eyes.

"Sombrerismo" the second 2013 commission on the program, was lighter in tone. All six of the company's men starred in this hat-tossing caper. Belgian-Colombian choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa says in a note that the flat-brimmed headgear is intended to represent "iconic" hats throughout the world, so perhaps it's intentional that dance fans will recall Baryshnikov's bowler-hat antics in "Push Comes to Shove." Much of the movement is pedestrian, but then the men will pause and lift a body above the crowd, as though six guys on their way to work suddenly started moshing at a crosswalk. The music is a mix of Latin clubbing tunes and streetscape sounds, accentuated by thigh slaps from the men. The latter is Ochoa's calling card. The Belgian-Colombian choreographer's work was last seen at the Kennedy Center when she created a Latin-themed piece for the Washington Ballet.

The program closed with its most authentically rousing number: "Danzon," by Ballet Hispanico's artistic director Eduardo Vilaro. Legendary Cuban jazz clarinetist Paquito D'Rivera was onstage with his ensemble to provide the music., which included "A Night in Tunisia" and "Oye Como Va."

The piece feels like an elegant night at a club rather than a magical collaboration. Still, the dancers, with their supple backs, effortless turns and perfectly pointed bare feet made it feel like a luxury. At every curtain call, Ballet Hispanico earned uncharacteristic — but deserved —

whoops from a well-heeled crowd. It's been six years since the troupe last came to the Kennedy Center. Let's hope they return and retain an enthusiastic following, because even in the world of contemporary dance, rare is the show that can be called a cutting-edge crowd pleaser.

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