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Ballet Hispanico takes all-Cuban program to Wolf Trap

By Rebecca J. Ritzel, Published: June 21



EDUARDO PATINO/ BALLET HISPANICO - Lauren Alzamora, Donald Borrer in 'Asuka'

If the weather cooperates Tuesday night at Wolf Trap, temperatures will be warm at nightfall, with a waft of a breeze. The curtain will rise, and the spotlight will shine on a not-so-tall but dark and handsome man and a woman wearing a black, backless dress slit up to her thighs. Over the speakers, Buena Vista Social Club will begin strumming guitars and crooning saxophones. The man will light a cigar and pass it to his partner. Slowly, cigar still in hand, they begin to rumba.

The only thing inauthentic about this re-creation of a Havana nightclub scene? That cigar. It was NOT imported from Cuba. Because that would be illegal. But importing the mystique — the music, the dance steps, the sexy ambiance of Old Havana — that is certainly allowed.

In what might come as an alluring surprise, Tuesday's Wolf Trap performance marks the first time in Ballet Hispanico's 41-year history that the troupe has toured with an all-Cuban program. All three works are created by Cuban Americans and set to Cuban music. Eduardo Vilaro, the choreographer who took over the New York-based company in 2009, says the first reason for the milestone is simple: No one else has ever asked for it. The second reason is a little more complicated: timing.

"Who knows? This is an interesting trial run," Vilaro said. He's amused by Wolf Trap's marketing slogan, "special all-Cuban program." "It sounds like we are going to be having mojitos with you," he said, laughing, but then he turned serious. "But I think that really instead of a Cuban night, it's a Cuban introspection night."

As tensions ease between the United States and our neighboring island nation, Cuban American dance leaders such as Vilaro; Lourdes Lopez, newly appointed artistic director of Miami City Ballet; and Septime Webre, the artistic director of the Washington Ballet, are conscious of the role dance can play in diplomatic relations and the public consciousness.

"Cuba has always loomed large in the American psyche," Webre said. "Cuban music, culture and dance is just so vivid. And add the mystique of it being out of American's reach for the past 50 years, and it has almost become fabled. . . . We are in such an interesting time, with change coming in relatively big doses, in the relationship between our two countries. Americans are just naturally interested, and that's before we've even danced a single step."

Geoff Thale, a Cuba expert at the Washington Office on Latin America, credits the Obama administration's ease on trade and travel restrictions with an overall increase in curiosity about Cuba. "The cultural thaw is a long way ahead of the political thaw," Thale said, speaking by phone from a restaurant in Havana, where a band was playing in the background. "It's been much easier in the last few years for cultural workers and artists from Cuba to travel to, study and perform in the U.S., and vice versa."

For the third time this year, Thale was leading a research trip to Cuba for academics, politicians and think-tank experts. By day, the groups may visit with Cuban officials and give advice to businesses trying to privatize. On their evenings off? Thale recommends an outing to the Cuban National Ballet, the famed company founded by Alicia Alonso. Webre calls Alonso "the second-most-famous Cuban in the world." Second most famous after Fidel Castro, that is.

"Sitting at the ballet watching a great performance, it's very hard to understand how this country is a threat to the U.S.," Thale said.

Ballet and ballet dancers have been a leading Cuban export for decades, with the Royal Ballet's Carlos Acosta being probably the most famous current dancer. Washington audiences had a rare chance to see the Cuban company last year, when the Kennedy Center brought the company to perform "[Don Quixote](#)." The Cuban dancers traveled on to New York to take part in ¡Si Cuba!, a cultural festival organized by the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Vilaro participated in a workshop, discussions and a master class that were part of the festival, but the emphasis was on performances by visiting Cuban companies, not work by Cuban Americans.

“That got me thinking,” Vilaro said. “What about the other side of the coin? There are Cubans working here. What is their art?”



(Eduardo Patino/ Ballet Hispanico) - The Company in ‘Asuka’

So began his concentrated effort to nurture Cuban-specific work, both by himself and the next generation of Cuban American choreographers. Last weekend, Ballet Hispanico hosted a public showing of works in progress by Rosie Herrerra and Abdul Latif. “Asuka,” Vilaro’s modern dance homage to Cuban singer Celia Cruz, premiered in December and was funded in part by Goya Foods. Vilaro calls the choreography a “deconstructed mambo.” At Wolf Trap on Tuesday, “Asuka” will be the middle work on a program that includes two pieces by Pedro Ruiz: “Guajira,” a tribute to the hardworking women of Cuba’s countryside, and “Club Havana,” the sultry recreation of nightclub life that’s a standard in the company’s repertory.



(George Kalinsky) - Lauren Alzamora, Donald Borrer, Min-Tzu Li in 'Guajira'

What the trio of works have in common, Vilaro said, is a sense of nostalgia. Between songs, the music in “Asuka” fades to warbling radio announcers and record-player static. The club scene idealized in “Club Havana” harkens back to the pre-revolutionary days, when Havana was a tourist playground for wannabe ballroom dancers and when street dancing scenes, such as those depicted in the 2004 film “[Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights](#),” were a bit more common.

“Nostalgia is big for the Cuban people here,” Vilaro said. “Works like ‘Asuka’ ask, what is that nostalgia that connects and disconnects us?”

Vilaro came to the states in 1969, at age 6. America’s Cuban population is somewhat divided between exiles like his parents and a younger generation that is more interested in connecting to Latino culture than kvetching about the communist revolution of 1959.

Washington does not have a large Cuban population, and although a Wolf Trap spokeswoman said the park has made point of hanging posters at area Cuban bakeries and restaurants, she could not speak to any specific marketing efforts. It’s unclear whether the Ballet Hispanico program will appeal to the area’s larger Latino population.

Marketing to the Latino community is a tricky thing, Webre said. It requires long-term grass-roots outreach. “You can’t just hang out a shingle and say, ‘Come see us,’ ” he said. Yet the Washington Ballet’s May “[Noche Latina](#)” program, featuring three Latin-themed works, was the company’s best-selling repertory performance ever.

As the country’s Hispanic population grows, arts organizations will have to wrestle with how to reach it — but dance might be a step ahead and draw an even broader audience.

“The vibrancy of Latin culture is very attractive, and Latin dancers are warm dancers who dance with a kind of amplitude,” Webre said. Combine the allure of Latin dance with the mystery of an off-limits island, and Ballet Hispanico’s program becomes as tempting as a humidor full of forbidden cigars.

“We are Cuba-watching right now, and the Cuban cultural manifestations humanizes that relationship,” Webre said. “The dancers are a metaphor for an idealized Cuba.”

Ritzel is a freelance writer.

Ballet Hispanico

performs Tuesday at 8:30 p.m. at the Wolf Trap’s Filene Center. 1551 Trap Rd., Vienna. Call 703-255-1900 or go to www.wolftrap.org.