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Ballet Hispanico: From Show.Girl. To Danzón



Photo by Paula Lobo

By Rafa Carvajal

[Ballet Hispanico](#), the leading Latino dance organization in the U.S., will visit Miami June 6-7 for two performances at the [Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts](#). For more than 40 years, Ballet Hispanico has represented the ever-changing diversity of our nation's Latino culture through dance performances by some of our country's most accomplished technical contemporary dancers. The legendary music of [Paquito D'Rivera](#), the extraordinary choreography of Eduardo Vilaro and the work of Miami's own [Rosie Herrera](#) will come together on stage for a world-class celebration of music and movement that will include four distinct ballets.

Show.Girl., a world premiere by Arsht Center Artistic Associate Rosie Herrera, a 2013 [Princess Grace Award](#) winner, uses the Cuban cabaret aesthetic to explore the Latina female identity. *Sombrerísimo*, by Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, makes references to the surrealist world of the Belgian painter René Magritte, who is famous for his paintings of men in bowler hats. *Sortijas*, by Cayetano Soto to the music of Lhasa de Sela, is an enigmatically sumptuous duet full of emotional complexity that muses the unavoidable impact of fate in our lives. *Danzón*, by Artistic Director Eduardo Vilaro with live music by the Paquito D'Rivera ensemble, merges traditional and classic Cuban dance and reinvents it with contemporary movement melodies by playing on the fusion of jazz improvisation and Cuban rhythms that thrusts the dancers into a celebration of music and movement.

I interviewed Rosie Herrera and Artistic Director Eduardo Vilaro to learn more about Ballet Hispanico's upcoming performances.

Rafa Carvajal: What inspired you to create *Show.Girl.* and what is it about?

Rosie Herrera: I was a showgirl/dancer in a cabaret/theater show in Little Havana when I was in high school and became friends with a phenomenal male dancer named Nakia. He was the definition of masculine. We became dear friends, but when I moved away to college, we lost touch – this was before Facebook. Almost 10 years later, I was on Lincoln Road when, out of nowhere, I was picked up into the air and getting kissed by this huge beautiful drag queen that knew my name. It was with the help of my dear friends and fellow drag divas, Geraldine and Fernandi Q, that I realized Nakia had become the beloved drag persona Shanaya Bright. It was shocking, particularly since he was (and still is) one of the most masculine men I've ever worked with. After our reunion, we started to work together creatively on and off stage.

Shanaya had been a dancer for many shows in Colombia, Vegas and Miami. When the Tropicana in the Fontainebleau closed, he started choreographing and designing costumes for drag queens. He was choreographing the numbers, making the costumes, organizing bookings and teaching the girls how to move gracefully. After a while, he decided he might as well do drag himself. This is where things got interesting because as a true showboy, having grown up as a dancer in elaborate stage shows, his only real female role models were showgirls. Seeing this incredibly masculine, large, barrel-chested man transform himself into an elegant showgirl allowed me to see the aesthetic of showgirl movements in an entirely objective and new way. Nothing about him read as feminine. He really had to use his physical knowledge to embody this specific brand

of femininity. As a dancer, it was as if I was seeing these movements and postures for the first time.

In the context of these shows, the object is the costume not the woman wearing it. The female figures are stylized models whose forms reveal the theatrical properties of the costume. In *Show.Girl.*, I aim to invite critical reflection on what this style of performance reveals about the construction of femininity and masculinity in contemporary culture, particularly in how it relates to Latinidad, and on the relationship between entertainment and art within contemporary concert dance.

Drawing on my own experiences as a showgirl, I was often struck by how it felt to act as a frame for a larger picture but to never really be the center of it. I sometimes really liked that. No matter how large your emotional experience was, it was worth compressing for the greater good, the prettier picture. There is a certain selfless beauty that resides just 20 feet from the spotlight, and I was interested in exploring what that revealed to me about myself and what drew me there in the first place.

RC: There are countless reasons why people turn to dance. Why did you seek expression through dance?

RH: It is the only thing that feels honest.

RC: What inspires you to dance and what do you enjoy the most about it?

RH: Everything inspires me to move. I dance when I am filled with joy and when I am without joy. I dance to connect with my friends, my family and my demons. I think dance is a deeper, more honest means of communication between two people. Martha Graham once said, "Movement never lies."

I think what I enjoy the most about dancing is when you lose yourself for a few fleeting moments and you are kind of just riding between the physical world and another dreamy fantasy world.

RC: How do you feel now that you are creating new work for one of the most important dance companies in the country?

RH: I am so honored to be working with such a phenomenal group of artists at Ballet Hispanico. I took a lot of risks with this new work because of the support, talent and enthusiasm they offered me throughout the whole process. I am particularly excited to be working with the company at a time when they are making broad strokes in a new, exciting direction. Ballet Hispanico has been the strongest Latino voice in dance in the United States for more than 40 years, and as we Latinos continue to redefine ourselves in contemporary society, Ballet Hispanico has stepped up to be the voice of that ever-changing identity. As a Latina, I am deeply honored to join the ranks of phenomenal choreographers before me who have called the company their second home. In addition, I am so in love with the dancers and their incredible talent and generosity, and I know Miami audiences will be too.



RC: How do you feel about winning last year's Princess Grace Award?

RH: This was definitely an honor I never imagined receiving. There is such a long lineage of excellence associated with the Princess Grace Award, and to be considered amongst such incredible talent was deeply rewarding. Plus I got to dress up!

RC: What do you have in mind for future projects?

RH: I am currently working on a solo show with the working title *Cookie's Kid* that explores what is inherit muscle memory and a larger group work entitled *Make Believe*.

RC: What do you enjoy the most about performing on stage?

RH: The exchange with an audience.

RC: What did you find most challenging when creating *Show.Girl*?

RH: *Show.Girl* was the first ever work I set about to do for a company aside from my own, so it presented many new challenges. I work in a collaborative manner with my performers and that requires an incredible amount of trust. Creating an environment for the dancers to feel safe enough to really contribute, to argue and to reveal themselves in a short amount of time was the biggest challenge.

RC: What has been the funniest or most embarrassing moment that has happened to you on stage?

RH: That's a rich question, particularly considering my unique performance background. I've gotten choked by a massive parrot head during a kick routine, slipped on lube and slid into the audience 10 feet below, sang an entire aria in the wrong key, made out with Dave Navarro, was a really, really, really bad free-styling zombie hooker from outer space with [Blowfly](#), and I am embarrassed to say what I did with a little person and a bottle of Windex.

RC: Is there anything else you would like to share with [Wire Magazine](#) readers?

RH: I am really nervous and excited about this new work and I hope to share that scary new experience with my Miami audience's love by my side.

Rafa Carvajal: What is your role as artistic director of Ballet Hispanico?

Eduardo Vilaro: As the artistic director of Ballet Hispanico, I am responsible for maintaining the vision of the organization and immersing all our constituents in the passion of the mission. I am the creative director who assures the aesthetic of our artistic components, which are the Company, School of Dance and our Outreach and Education programs.

RC: Please tell our readers what the upcoming show is about.

EV: The upcoming show is an exciting journey through the diversity of the Hispanic soul. We are bringing four innovative ballets that explore Latino essences and celebrate the music and passion of a culture. We open with a work titled *Sombrerísimo* by Anabelle Lopez Ochoa, which is an athletic tour-de-force for the men of Ballet Hispanico, followed by Spanish choreographer Caeytano Soto's lush and sensual duet titled *Sortijas* and the premiere of Miami-based Rosie Herrera's *Show.Girl*. Our finale is an electrifying tribute to Cuban music and dance titled *Danzón*, with live music by Grammy-winner Paquito D'Rivera.

RC: What are you looking forward to the most about Ballet Hispanico's first show in Miami after such a long time?

EV: Ballet Hispanico has been in Miami previously but not since the late '90s. As someone who spent his childhood summers in Miami, I am excited to come back home with this amazing company. I am looking forward to connecting with the community and re-introducing Miami to the premier Latino dance company.

RC: What is your favorite segment to perform in the program and why?

EV: I love performing with live music and we are thrilled to have Paquito D'Rivera and his musicians join us for the performances of my ballet, *Danzón*.

RC: Why did you choose Miami for the world premier of *Show.Girl*?

EV: I chose Miami because it is Rosie's home and the perfect opportunity to celebrate our work together. At Ballet Hispanico, we nurture emerging artists and we have had a wonderful partnership with Rosie that will be celebrated and honored at the amazing Arsht Center.

RC: As dancers you inspire people. What inspires you to perform?

EV: Dancers spend a lifetime honing their technique and skills and are inspired by many aspects of dance itself, but inspiration can come from many places. Life and personal experience can be a big inspiration, as well as music, literature and other art forms.

RC: Which part of Ballet Hispanico do you feel will resonate most with Miami audiences and why?

EV: All of Ballet Hispanico will resonate with Miami audiences! Our dancers, the passion, and the theatricality are an experience that only an innovative Hispanic dance company can produce. I hope we will resonate with your exciting, cosmopolitan and sleek city, mostly because we share those same characteristics.

RC: What advice do you have for those starting out in the dance business?

EV: Just do it! If you have the dream, then do everything you can to attain it. Dance is the most difficult of art forms because there is no hiding. Your body is your instrument and your canvas, so it is always in full view. However, it is also the most versatile and profound.

RC: Is there anything else you would like to share with *Wire Magazine* readers?

EV: Stay connected even after we've left Miami! Learn more about our dancers, our wonderful work and upcoming tour stops by visiting www.ballethispanico.org.



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