

DANCE REVIEW

Ballet Hispánico delivers spirited fun in a 50th anniversary performance at Jacob's Pillow

By **Janine Parker** Correspondent, Updated July 15, 2021, 1:00 p.m.



Simone Cameresi, Dandara Veiga, and Shelby Colona of Ballet Hispánico in "Tiburones" at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival 2021. CHRISTOPHER DUGGAN

BECKET — The celebration of Ballet Hispánico's golden anniversary during this week's performances at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival comes, technically speaking, a year late. No matter: With this spirited cadre of terrific dancers performing this fun triple bill, *better late than never*

Founded by Tina Ramirez in 1970 and directed by Eduardo Vilaro since 2009, the company has a mission that emphasizes educating the public about Latinx art and artists. Indeed, the program opens with something of a film history/cultural appropriation lesson with Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's 2019 "Tiburones" — that's "Sharks," as in the Puerto Rican "gang" in "West Side Story," the iconic 1957 musical which was adapted into a film in 1961. "West Side Story"'s many glories are complicated by the fact that some of the Puerto Rican characters were drawn in ugly stereotypes, and many of the film actors appeared in "brownface."

Not exactly light fare, this taking on of a classic and its gnarly barnacles, and yet, while "Tiburones" has some bite to it, it has a good deal of wit too. It is composed of a series of abstract vignettes, with dancers alternating between moving or posing per the now capricious, now calculated demands of the Director, and boldly sweeping about the stage. That Director, performed with pitch-perfect sliminess by Chris Bloom, is more Disney villain than seriously menacing; he orders the others around by use of the (increasingly futile) snap of his clapboard. There are a few fraught scenes with Dandara Veiga, but she proves too strong to succumb to his will. Is this all too easy? Maybe; or perhaps Ochoa's often-playful dismissal of these tropes shows what she thinks of them — laughable.

Better yet is the way that some conventions are simply erased: The main duet (with strains of "Maria" heard now in the eclectic score), both sensual and tense, is danced by two men. Antonio Cangiano and Omar Rivéra circle one another, this way, that way, with a kind of tactile wariness, drawn to one another but uncertain; the magnetic pulse between them is palpable, and their physical contact develops — a lean, a promenade, a lift, a bigger lift — as their human connection deepens. And when pairs of stilettos finally make it to the stage, it's men's feet who are so cruelly yet glamorously sheathed, in a funny, judiciously brief dance in which the men strut (of course) and kick and swivel.



There's nothing to unpack in the excerpts from Vicente Nebrada's 1982 "Batucada Fantástica," a frolicking company warhorse set to Carnival-worthy music by the Brazilian percussionist Luciano Perrone. Three dancers, wearing brightly-colored unitards designed by Diana Ruettiger, take turns in zippy, charming, old-school ballet-jazzy solos that have the joyous, easy nature of a dancer noodling alone in a studio. Simone Cameresi flits between breezy pirouettes and staccato runs; Shelby Colona makes long serpentine shapes with her arms, or kicks her leg, with effortless precision, to her nose; Paulo Hernandez-Farella moves their torso with a mixture of sharp lines and fluid undulations, then finishes their solo with comic relief, faux-stumbling and crumpling to the ground after a whirlwind of turns.



Dandara Veiga of Ballet Hispánico in "18+1" at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival 2021. CHRISTOPHER DUGGAN

Gustavo Ramírez Sansano's 2012 "18+1" has also become a company favorite: Abounding in Sansano's trademarks — awkward, yet endearingly human gestures as well as sequences of compellingly simple ensemble work— and set to music by the “mambo king” Pérez Prado, the piece is fairly irresistible, even more so given the dancers' full-hearted and -bodied commitment. In Ghabriello Fernando's handsome slate-gray tunics over black calf-length pants, they look like a studious school of fish in the unison sections, moving with an eerie precision that seems ritualistic rather than rote. Their enviable group-vibe is at once mesmerizing and inviting — I had a fleeting vision of audience members rushing to join them, as if it were a line dance at a wedding — while the smaller groupings offer lovely, more detailed portraits of the dancers. Especially delicious are Veiga's and Colona's solos; both women seem suspended in a private groove while communicating directly with each of us.

After the performance, I heard an adult behind me say, with great enthusiasm, to a child “That’s what professional dancers look like!” You bet. Happy anniversary, Ballet Hispánico.

BALLET HISPÁNICO

At Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, Becket, through Sunday. Tickets \$45. 413-243-0745, www.jacobspillow.org

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