

The New York Times

NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER, 29, 1990



Tom Brazil

José Costas, foreground, of the Ballet Hispánico in "Cafe America."

Review/**Dance**

In Ballet Hispánico's Work, New Twist on an Old Style

By JENNIFER DUNNING

The art of narrative dance is not dead or even moribund, at least as far as Ballet Hispánico is concerned. The company opened a two-week, 20th-anniversary season on Tuesday at the Joyce Theater (175 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street) with a program of three dances whose vibrant storytelling made for an evening of good old-fashioned entertainment. Not that anything about it seemed dated.

In its earliest years, Ballet Hispánico and its repertory had the look of rough-edged, intensely evocative folk art. The dancers are sleeker now, with the look of well-trained racehorses, but this latest crop of Hispánico performers has retained something of that old expressiveness and commitment. And the story dances they performed had a vitality and stylishness typical of the company.

George Faison's timely new "Cafe America" is a bittersweet depiction of immigrants to the United States. One man has entered this country illegally, and by the end of the dance he has disappeared. Deported, presumably, he leaves behind two immi-

grant friends — and a wrenching sense of crushed hope and joy.

Danced to music by Rubén Blades and Julio Iglesias, "Cafe America" takes place on a stage that is empty but for a bright and battered car with flashing headlights, wittily designed by Pepón Osorio. Tim Hunter's lighting suggests a sweeping expanse of horizon, both geographic and spiritual. And Mr. Faison's choreography is as expansive — an elegant if slightly repetitive blend of ballet and jazz dancing that takes the men from their anxious, watchful first days together in a new country to their quick apprehension of all that is gaudiest and giddiest there.

Best of all were the performances of José Costas as the new immigrant and Pedro Ruiz and Eduardo Vilaro as his friends. Mr. Faison's tight-sprung, lyrical dance flowed authoritatively through their bodies. And each man established a personality — Mr. Costas a wiry, quick learner; Mr. Ruiz so full of delight in his surroundings that his face was transfigured with radiance, and Mr. Vilaro a wryly savvy survivor with a sense of humor and the look of being the most adaptable of the three. Bernard Johnson

designed the stylish overalls and comically brilliant-colored suits worn by the men.

Vicente Nebrada's "Iñez de Castro" is one of those historical dances that is filled with skulking monarchs, innocent young lovers and coolly vicious rejected fiancées. But this strange tale of love and death in 14th-century Spain, which ends with the coronation of a dead woman as queen, is set to a churning dramatic score by Sergio Cervetti and performed on a stage carved out of equally dramatic shadows and mist, the work of the lighting designer Donald Holder. And though Mr. Nebrada offers the dancers plenty of opportunities for the kind of direct performing that lives in silent movies, he does so with a distanced, knowing touch.

Nearly everyone gets a chance at the star turns neatly embedded in this spooling, lyrical piece. And this was a strong, clear performance, led by Mr. Costas as Alonso, King of Portugal; Mr. Ruiz as Pedro, the Prince of Portugal; Nancy Turano as Iñez de Castro, the prince's doomed

Good storytelling keeps the narrative form alive.

lover; Kathryn Ross as the evil Spanish princess Blanca, and William Elias as the turbaned, slithering assassin.

Graciela Daniele's new "Stages" is an affectionate tribute to Tina Ramirez, the founder of Ballet Hispánico, who in her quietly visionary, elegant way is one of the unsung heroes of dance in New York. An unabashed ingenious *pièce d'occasion* set to Broadway show-style music composed by James Kowal, "Stages" offered a tour through the world of dance — and of the very different styles at which the Hispánico dancers excel, from classical ballet to Broadway-Caribbean and jazz-flavored modern dance.

Jorgelina Sabe, a charmingly impudent student at the Ballet Hispánico school, was the young girl who, possibly, represented Miss Ramirez in her beginning days as a dancer. Mr. Costas was a deliciously moody choreographer who kisses his ballerina, Ms. Turano, then walks off with her handsome partner, Mr. Ruiz. The lead cast also included Suzanne Troiano and Miss Ramirez, in a surprise appearance at the end. The score was performed by Mr. Kowal on the piano and Jimmy Daniel on percussion. Loy Arcenas designed the set and Ann Hould-Ward the costumes, with lighting by Mr. Holder. Ms. Daniele was assisted by Willie Rosario.