



Ballet *Hispánico* at Kingsbury Hall: Motion, Memory, and the Pulse of Latin Identity

Description

Salt Lake City, UT As UtahPresents celebrates its tenth-anniversary season, it fittingly welcomed a titan of American dance: *Ballet Hispánico*—the New York-based company now in its fifty-fifth year, celebrated for blending contemporary choreography with the textures of Latin and Caribbean forms.

As arts writer **Les Roka** observed in his preview for *The Utah Review* (2025), *Ballet Hispánico* was **founded in 1970 by Tina Ramirez**, emerging during the height of the civil rights era as a revolutionary space for Latin artists. Reflecting on that moment, Ramirez recalled:

“At that time, people didn’t know what Hispanic meant—not even the Hispanics. I was criticized for calling the company Ballet Hispánico. People felt I should name it after a country or a city or a town. But I said no, because we’re twenty-one nations that all speak Spanish—and we should all be included! my purpose was to create better understanding between Hispanics and non-Hispanics, and what better way than through dance and through art?”

That inclusive philosophy continues to guide Artistic Director Eduardo Vilaro, whose programming frames identity not as static heritage but as an evolving dialogue (Roka, 2025).

Salt Lake City marks *Ballet Hispánico*’s fifth stop on a six-city October tour—an itinerary that mirrors the company’s broader mission to move across borders, communities, and languages. In Utah, that mission felt especially resonant: a reminder that Latin identity is not a singular story, but a constellation of histories, rhythms, and reinventions (Roka, 2025).

As a scholar and reviewer, part of my mission is to highlight artists and performances that push the boundaries of “traditional” art—works that reimagine form, unsettle expectation, and reveal how performance as an archive can become an act of resistance and revelation. Ballet *Hispánico* embodies this commitment. What unfolded onstage at Kingsbury Hall was not only technically exquisite but

thematically expansive: a living archive of Latin identity that moves through colonial memory, gendered myth, and collective joy.

Buscando a Juan

Choreography: Eduardo Vilaro

Music: Osvaldo Golijov's *La Pasión según San Marcos* (including "Lua descolorida," "Procession," and "Crucifixion"), recorded by Orquesta La Pasión, members of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela, and María Guinand

Costume Design: Eduardo Vilaro with Dianela Gil

Lighting and Set Design: Christopher Ash

Featured Roles: Juan de Pareja (Amir J. Baldwin), Diego Velázquez (Antonio Cangiano), The Calling of Juan (Francesca Levita & Amir J. Baldwin)

A dramatic dance performance featuring multiple dancers in a dynamic formation, with a warm orange palette. Photo: Leonardo Brito, right, with members of Ballet Hispánico in *Buscando a Juan*, a world premiere at New York City Center. Credit: Rachel Papo for The New York Times

The evening opened with Artistic Director Eduardo Vilaro's *Buscando a Juan*, a meditation on the life of Afro-Hispanic painter Juan de Pareja, who was enslaved by Diego Velázquez for more than two decades before becoming an artist in his own right. Vilaro described *Buscando a Juan* as "a meditation on this man who is full of intersections," emphasizing that the piece is "not a narrative" but rather a reflection of the "immigrant experience of those who were removed, who were extracted without clear lineage or legacy" (Boguszewski, 2024). Vilaro situates the work not merely as an homage to an unsung figure but as a meditation on authorship, erasure, and the ongoing reverberations of colonial history.

Until recently, Pareja was known largely through an oft-repeated myth. As arts writer Shanti Escalante-De Mattei summarized, "Velázquez, a favorite of King Philip IV, resided in court along with his dutiful slave de Pareja. Unknown to him, Pareja was making paintings in secret. One day, the art-loving king stumbled upon Pareja's surreptitious labor and demanded that he be freed, declaring that 'The man who had such talent cannot be a slave.'" The reality, however, is more complex. The key to understanding Pareja's circumstances came when art historian Jennifer Montagu discovered the artist's manumission document, reframing him not as the grateful protégé of a benevolent genius but as a self-determined craftsman navigating power and precarity (Roka, 2025).

Vilaro was particularly moved when Pareja's work was featured in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2023 exhibition *Juan de Pareja: Afro-Hispanic Painter*. In seventeenth-century Seville, enslaved artisans were common, but Pareja's proximity to Velázquez—so esteemed by the crown that he was permitted to accompany his master on European travels—made his position singular (Roka, 2025). After Velázquez's death, Pareja remained in the studio "if only to make ends meet." As Escalante-De Mattei notes, over his career as a free man, he produced large, luminous religious scenes: *The Virgin Mary Surrounded by Cherubs at the Moment of Immaculate Conception*, *The Baptism of Christ*, and *The Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt*. In one particularly stunning work, *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (1661), Pareja inserted a self-portrait at the left edge of the canvas—the figure holding a slip of paper with his name on it" (Roka, 2025).



Painting: Juan de Pareja, *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, 1661, oil on canvas, 225 x 325 cm ([Museo del Prado](#), Madrid, Credit: Steven Zucker)

Vilaro translates this act of self-representation into embodied motion. At Kingsbury Hall, *Buscando a Juan* opened with the sound of ocean waves and Golijovâ??s layered percussion, evoking both passage and exile. **Amir J. Baldwin as Pareja** and **Antonio Cangiano as VelÃ¿zquez** moved in counterpoint beneath a gauzy light, their skin tones and gestures in deliberate contrast. According to Vilaro, he â??wanted to begin with the tension between the seen and unseen bodyâ??the artist as both presence and absence in historyâ?• (Roka, 2025). This opening duet embodies that vision: a dialogue between bondage and freedom, shadow and recognition (Benjamin, 2024). While Baldwin is credited as Pareja and Cangiano as VelÃ¿zquez, the duet resists literal reenactment; instead, it serves as a metaphor for the artistâ??s divided selfhoodâ??creator and property, visibility and servitude, resistance and reverence.

Their movements trace the tension of a body becoming visible through creation even as it remains bound by history. Dressed in soft earth tones and flowing linen, the dancers evoked the muted palette of a Baroque painting—ochres, creams, and deep browns recalling the canvases of Velázquez himself. The restrained costuming emphasized texture over spectacle, allowing gesture and light to become the primary instruments of storytelling.

Two male dancers performing an expressive duet, showcasing dynamic movement and emotional connection. Antonio Cangiano and Leonardo Brito in *Buscando a Juan*. • Credit: Benjamin Rivera

The ensemble followed, rippling outward from Baldwin's body like a chain reaction of acknowledgment. Their movements, alternately fluid and fragmented, mirrored Golijov's percussive score—a soundscape fusing sacred choral lament with Afro-Caribbean rhythm. At times, silence punctuated the motion, the dancers' audible breathing filling the hall—a stark contrast to the moments saturated in sound.

At its premiere, *The New York Times* dance critic Gia Kourlas described *Buscando a Juan* as "a search for artistic identity and the struggle and faith it takes to find it," noting how the duet between Leonardo Brito as Pareja and Antonio Cangiano as Velázquez "trades strength and resistance in sculptural balances and lifts" (Kourlas, 2024). In Salt Lake City, Amir J. Baldwin and Antonio Cangiano carried that same dynamic forward—a physical dialogue where the question of control dissolved into shared vulnerability.

Describing the premiere, *The Dance Enthusiast* said the choreography "simmer[s] beneath the surface, thrashing fists and covered eyes hinting at explosive potential" (Benjamin, 2024). That same restrained intensity defined this performance: a portrait in motion where the painter's brushstroke becomes heartbeat, each phrase of movement a reclamation of authorship through rhythm.

The effect was both elegiac and urgent—a living restoration of a man once confined to the margins of another's canvas. In *Buscando a Juan*, Vilaro resurrects him not as subject or servant but as creator, his story continuing to pulse through every movement of the diaspora.

Three dancers with bright red wigs and red gloves pose together, each holding a white fan. They were Isabel Robles, Amanda del Valle and Cori Lewis in *House of Mademoiselle*. • Credit: Benjamin Rivera

House of Mademoiselle

Choreography: Annabelle Lopez Ochoa

Music: Leonard Bernstein (*Maria*), Chavela Vargas (*La Llorona*), Oro Sólido (*La Tanguita Roja*), Charles Gounod (*Ave Maria*), and Bart Rijnick (original sound design)

Soundscape: Bart Rijnick

Costume Conception: Annabelle Lopez Ochoa

Costume Development and Construction: Diana Ruettiger

Drag Dramaturgy and Wardrobe: Nicholas Villeneuve

Lighting Design: Christopher Ash

Featured Role: MarÃa (Mia Bermudez)

Buscando a Juan reflected the colonial gaze outward; *House of Madâ??moiselle* turned that gaze inwardâ??to interrogate cultural and psychological inheritance, specifically the intertwined gender scripts of *marianismo* and *machismo* that continue to shape emotional expression in Latinx communities.

Anchored in the exploration of stereotypes and representations of icons, House of Madâ??moiselle builds upon the duality of sacred and profane dimensions of the ubiquitous MarÃa in many of her manifestations (Roka, 2025). It is also a deeply personal work for Ochoa, who is part Colombian and spent her formative years in Belgium, only later learning Spanish in her life (Roka, 2025).

In an interview with *The Dance Enthusiast*, Vilaro explained that Ochoaâ??s restaging of *House of Madâ??moiselle* expands its original celebration of womanhood to interrogate â??larger questions of what is genderâ? and â??how do we accept gender,â? framing femininity and machismo within contemporary discourse on identity and power (Boguszewski, 2024).

Ochoaâ??s surreal, camp-infused workâ??filled with pink wigs, bare-chested male dancers, women in nude-toned bras, and waves of operatic distortionâ??unfolded like a fever dream of the Virgin Mary herself. The soundscape, stitched from Bernsteinâ??s â??Maria,â? Vargasâ??s haunting â??La Llorona,â? Oro SÃlidoâ??s merengue hit â??La Tanguita Roja,â? Gounodâ??s â??Ave Maria,â? and Rijnickâ??s electronic collage, moved between sacred and profane registers: lush classical grandeur giving way to static-filled screams, cha-cha rhythms colliding with devotional hymns.

The ensemble cycled through images of devotion, hysteria, seduction, and defiance: dancers slapped their thighs, shouted â??Ã¡MarÃa!â?, and collapsed under invisible expectations. The choreography illuminated what scholars have long observedâ??that marianismo, the cultural ideal of the self-sacrificing, pure, family-centered woman, can engender emotional repression and internalized suffering, while machismo valorizes dominance, anger, and stoicism as masculine ideals (NuÃez et al., 2016; Roka, 2025), findings grounded in empirical research linking traditional gender scripts to emotional distress.

Through the physical vocabulary of dance, Ochoa translated these sociocultural constructs into affective motion: a body trembling between holiness and humiliation, a chorus torn between reverence and revolt. The workâ??s chaos felt psychologicalâ??echoing research connecting rigid gender roles to depression, anxiety, and hostility among Hispanic men and women (Chida & Steptoe, 2009; Gallo & Matthews, 2003). In this sense, *House of Madâ??moiselle* was more than theatricalâ??it was diagnostic, turning centuries of gendered emotional conditioning into kinetic critique.

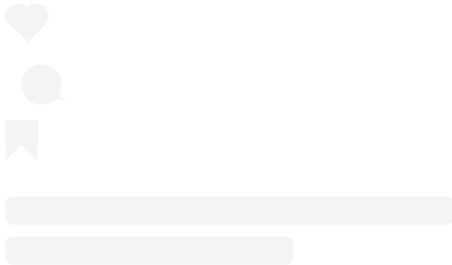
At its center, **Mia Bermudezâ??s MarÃa** embodied both saint and survivor. Her final slow walk through haze to Ave Maria, glittering with feathers, radiant and strangely still, captured the paradox of liberation through performance. Conceptually, the image might verge on absurdity; in the moment, it feels utterly sincere.

As *Dance Enthusiast* wrote of the 2024 New York restaging, â??Lopez Ochoaâ??s *House of Madâ??moiselle* establishes its aesthetic within secondsâ??bright red wigs, black pants, and drag sensibility. The dance never stops moving, shifting between satire and worship.â? Similarly, *Voce di Meche* called the work â??wacky, weird, and wonderful,â? praising its â??stimulating, colorful, and ultimately satisfyingâ? theatricality. In Salt Lake City, those same qualities resonated more as inquiry than spectacle: the movement felt not wacky but wounding, a dialogue between icon and emotion,

between divine image and human cost.



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Club Havana

Choreography: Pedro Ruiz

Music: Israel "Cachao" López ("A Gozar con Mi Combo"), Rubén González ("Mandinga"), A.K. Salim ("Afro-Soul"), Pérez Prado ("Mambo No. 5"), and Francisco Repilado "Compay Segundo" ("Chan Chan")

Costume Design: Emilio Sosa

Lighting Design: Donald Holder

Featured Dancers:

Opening: Mia Bermudez and Omar Riviera

Caballo: Olivia Winston and Dylan Dias McIntyre, Maya Canestaro and Matthew Mancuso, Andrea Mish and Amir J. Baldwin

Cha Cha Cha: Amanda Ostuni, Antonio Cangiano, and Omar Riviera

The night closed with **Pedro Ruiz's Club Havana**, a luminous celebration of Cuban music, movement, and memory. Ruiz's musical selections—drawn from the giants of pre-revolutionary Cuba, from Pérez Prado's brassy mambo to Rubén González's lyrical piano, infused the piece with irresistible nostalgia (Roka, 2025). Smoke drifted across the stage as dancers flicked their cigarettes and stepped into the rhythmic pulse of rumba, cha-cha, and conga, their bodies tracing the syncopations of *son cubano* and jazz.

The Opening, led by *Mia Bermudez* and *Omar Riviera*, established a tone of smoky intimacy and precise sensuality—hips swaying in conversation with Israel López's bass lines. The scene felt like an invitation: a doorway into Havana before the revolution, where social dance doubled as ritual and rebellion.

In **Caballo**, *Olivia Winston* and *Dylan Dias McIntyre*, *Maya Canestaro* and *Matthew Mancuso*, and *Andrea Mish* and *Amir J. Baldwin* charged the stage with syncopated flirtation. Their duets alternated between competitive play and effortless partnership, echoing the dialogue of González's musical phrasing. Each pairing carried its own tone—one bold and teasing, another graceful and restrained—all steeped in the humid thrill of dance-floor challenge.

Finally, **Cha Cha Cha**, featuring *Amanda Ostuni*, *Antonio Cangiano*, and *Omar Riviera*, shimmered with exuberance. Under amber and crimson light, the trio spun through Pérez Prado's brassy crescendos, transforming rhythmic pulse into spectacle. Ruiz's choreography balanced sensuality with precision: Ostuni in red and the men in gold and black, followed with a blend of deference and bravado. Each musical phrase sparked a new rhythm—flirtation, competition, seduction—until a disco ball descended, bathing the ensemble in kaleidoscopic color.

Club Havana has long been acclaimed for its choreographic opulence and remains one of Ballet Hispánico's signature showstoppers (Roka, 2025). In the twenty-five years since its creation, the work has been featured prominently: in 2016, *Lincoln Center at the Movies: Great American Dance* presented it in select theaters, and in 2017, PBS broadcast the film nationally to celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month (Roka, 2025).

Ruiz—a Cuban immigrant who danced as a principal with Ballet Hispánico for twenty-one years—crafted the piece as both a love letter to home and a portrait of cultural duality (Roka, 2025). The choreography revels in romantic clichés and period-specific tropes of machismo and desire, yet when viewed alongside *Buscando a Juan* and *House of Mademoiselle*, those gestures gain a new dimension. As Vilaro himself has observed, it is essential—not to negate that part of the history, but to contextualize it—understanding that such representations mark a chapter in a larger continuum of heritage, transformation, and reclamation (Roka, 2025).

BroadwayWorld called *Club Havana* “an atmospheric dance celebration filled with cigar puffing, flicks of disco ball light, and rhythm,” while *CriticalDance* praised it as “a rousing tribute to pre-Castro

Havanaâfilled with zest, sensuality, and Latin pride.â In Salt Lake City, that same exuberance transformed Kingsbury Hall into a nightclub: joy elevated to art.

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Final Reflections

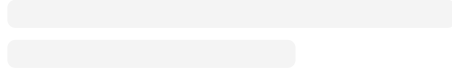
Ballet *Hispanico*âs 55th-anniversary program illuminated how dance can translate cultural history, emotions, and lived experience into embodied form, while telling a story. Through Golijovâs sacred lament, Ochoaâs sound-collaged fever dream, and Ruizâs intoxicating Cuban rhythms, the company showed that music and movement are inseparable languages of identity and endurance.

As my colleague **Mitzi Ceballos**, a PhD candidate at the University of Utah studying decolonial theory, insightfully noted after the performance, Ballet *Hispanico* âdisrupts monolithic representations of Hispanidad.â That disruption was palpable from the moment Artistic Director **Eduardo Vilaro** addressed the audienceâreminding us, with humor and warmth, that if we came expecting folklorico, we might be surprised. In a state where university-sponsored cultural events often center Aztec dance and mariachi (beloved traditions in their own right), *Ballet Hispanico* offered a different vision: one where *Hispanico* and *Hispanidad* are not bound by the past, but actively reshaped through contemporary expression, complexity, and contradiction.

UtahPresents could not have chosen a more fitting partner for its milestone year. Both institutions remind us that artâs highest calling is not replication but transformationâan ever-evolving conversation between tradition and innovation, between the heart, and the body that carries it.



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Show Information

Ballet Hispanico at Kingsbury Hall

Presented by UtahPresents as part of the Touring Dance Trio series

Venue: Kingsbury Hall, Salt Lake City, Utah

Date: October 15, 2025

Presented by: UtahPresents (Tenth Anniversary Season)

Company: Ballet Hispanico (New York, NY)

Artistic Director & CEO: Eduardo Vilaro

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Upcoming performance: Ballet Hispánico Performance (Whitewater, WI)

[October 18, 2025: The Young 930 West Main Street, Whitewater, WI 53190](#)

[@ballet.hispanico](#)

Buscando a Juan

World Premiere: 2024, New York City Center

Choreography & Costume Design: Eduardo Vilaro | *Associate Costume Design:* Dianela Gil | *Set & Lighting Design:* Christopher Ash

Music: Osvaldo Golijov • *La Pasión según San Marcos* (including *Lua descolorida*, *Procesión*, and *Crucifixión*), recorded by Orquesta La Pasión, members of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela, and María Guinand

Featured Roles: Juan de Pareja (Amir J. Baldwin), Diego Velázquez (Antonio Cangiano), The Calling of Juan (Francesca Levita & Amir J. Baldwin)

House of Mademoiselle

Premiere (Revision): 2024, New York City Center | *Original Premiere:* 2010, The Joyce Theatre

Choreography & Costume Conception: Annabelle Lopez Ochoa | *Soundscape:* Bart Rijnick | *Lighting Design:* Christopher Ash | *Drag Dramaturgy & Wardrobe:* Nicholas Villeneuve | *Costume Development:* Diana Ruettiger

Music: Leonard Bernstein (*Maria*), Chavela Vargas (*La Llorona*), Oro Sólido (*La Tanguita Roja*), Charles Gounod (*Ave Maria*), and Bart Rijnick (original electronic sound design)

Featured Role: María (Mia Bermudez)

Club Havana

World Premiere: 2000, The Joyce Theater

Choreography: Pedro Ruiz | *Costume Design:* Emilio Sosa | *Lighting Design:* Donald Holder | *Costume Construction:* Ghabriello Negron

Music: Israel Cachao • López (*A Gozar con Mi Combo*), Rubén González (*Mandinga*), A.K. Salim (*Afro-Soul*), Pérez Prado (*Mambo No. 5*), and Francisco Repilado • *Compay Segundo* (*Chan Chan*)

Original Production Support: Jody & John Arnhold, Dhuane & Douglas Tansill, Caroline Newhouse, American Express Company, AT&T, and New York State Council on the Arts

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