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Contemporary take on Cuba's Danzón comes to Strathmore

by Karen Schafer | Staff Writer

Forget Ricky Ricardo and his rendition of "Babalu." Cuba's artistic contributions are much more than a steamy evening at The Tropicana. And to prove this point, a coolly contemporary version of "Danzón" — meaning "big dance" and once the island's national dance — will be performed by the Luna Negra Dance Theatre, with music by clarinet and saxophone icon Paquito D'Rivera and the Turtle Island Quartet, on Friday at the Music Center at Strathmore.

"I took from the original, which includes typical courting and acknowledging a partner, and fusing the contemporary with traditional ideas," explains Eduardo Vilaro, Luna Negra's former artistic director, who has moved on to the same position at the Ballet Hispanico in New York. "Some of the duet exemplifies Danzón's history, but it is combined with contemporary ballet and music."

It is a true collaboration, with Vilaro incorporating original music created by D'Rivera and arranged by TIQ cellist Mark Summer. Another piece celebrates the quinceañera, the Latin coming of age ceremony for 15-year-old girls, while an improvisational dance, inspired by Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia," offers five of the 12 dancers a chance to create a solo dance right on the spot.

Whereas TIQ remains safely ensconced at the rear of the stage, D'Rivera will turn up the heat when he plays his horn while moving among the dancers. For D'Rivera, dodging the dancers is easier than it sounds.

"I'm a theater man," explains the nine-time Grammy award-winning clarinetist.

This meeting of disparate artists to create "Danzón" began decades ago when Vilaro and his family were "extracted" from Cuba in 1969.

"My father was an engineer and by virtue of his career, he was considered a dissident, and imprisoned," he recalls.

For some five months, Vilaro's mother wrote scores of petitions pleading for her husband's release. In the end, the government agreed, but with a painful caveat: "We had to leave with nothing. I didn't want to emigrate." With such upheaval, "strange things happen," Vilaro admits. "I grew up trying to forget, and then I wanted to remember."

That is when the memory of Danzón and its importance in dance history came into play for the artistic director. He learned that the island's colonization by the French and Spanish created an intermingling of each nation's rhythmic sensibilities. Then, coupled with African influences, Danzón became the "grandparent of the cha cha, salsa and rumba," he points out.

Vilaro didn't have an "aha" moment. Rather, he explains, dance ideas "are always running around in my brain." But upon hearing TIQ and Paquito D'Rivera's 2002 "Danzón" album a couple of years ago, he suggested that they collaborate on a dance and musical production.

Of course, such unions take financing, and that is when Strathmore got into the act. Once Shelley Brown, Strathmore's vice president of programming, learned about the collaboration and the need for additional funding, she was excited.

"We had such a long relationship with TIQ," she recalls. "But equally important was the connection between live music and dance. Often dance companies come to the Music Center and perform to taped music. With the center's amazing acoustics, we wanted it to be used to its full advantage."

Summer echoes that philosophy.

"When dance and live music come together, energy happens. It is more interesting. Each performance is different," the cellist points out.

"Danzón" became a reality with a commission from Strathmore and the University of Notre Dame's DeBartolo Performing Arts Center. It premiered last year in Chicago.

Amid all these collaborations, some folks might wonder how a classically trained string quartet ever considered playing jazz and Latin rhythms, let alone performing with D'Rivera. Suffice it to say, it has been a long road for the Northern California-based quartet. Sure, there was a Grammy in 2007, but some 25 years ago, Summer remembers detractors dismissing his "wimpy little string quartet's" attempts to play improvisational jazz and Latin. The common complaint was that "classical crossover was ill-advised, that we were trying to play stuff we shouldn't."

These guys were not about to be dissuaded. From the inception, the group took their instruments to the limit, performing everything from indigenous music to rock to bluegrass and hip-hop.

The collaboration between D'Rivera and TIQ took hold when they happened to reconnect in a New York airport after working at the same Kentucky venue. D'Rivera sent the quartet a score and TIQ created an arrangement, and the clarinetist was immediately "impressed."

"It is almost impossible to find a violinist who can swing," D'Rivera likes to say. It's like finding a barking cat." (He admits that TIQ "can sound like a barking cat.")

Never mind the feline references. Like Vilaro, D'Rivera is also a Cuban refugee seeking to keep his homeland's artistic contributions alive. Still, he refuses to define "Danzón" or how he and the other dancers and musicians create their interpretations.

"It's like asking an artist to describe the color yellow," he says.

It is best not to argue the point with D'Rivera, named clarinetist of the year by Downbeat Magazine, honored with a Guggenheim Fellowship and artistic director of Duke Ellington Jazz Festival in D.C.

As for Vilaro, he hopes audience members come to the event "with an open mind."

Strathmore presents Luna Negra Dance Theatre, with music by clarinet and saxophone icon Paquito D'Rivera and the Turtle Island Quartet performing "Danzón" at 8 p.m. Friday at the Music Center at Strathmore, 5301 Tuckerman Lane, North Bethesda. Tickets range from \$27 to \$67. Call 301-581-5100 or visit www.strathmore.org.