

Con Brazos Abiertos (2017)



Melissa Verdecia in *Con Brazos Abiertos* | Photo by Paula Lobo

Choreography by Michelle Manzanales

Artistic Collaboration with Ray Doñes

Soundscape includes Carla Morrison, Cheech & Chong, Julio Iglesias, Edward James Olmos, Gustavo Santaolalla, Michelle Manzanales, Juan Carlos Marin Marin, Ember Island, Mexican Institute of Sound

Poem by Maria Billini-Padilla

Costume Design by Diana Ruettiger

Lighting Design by Joshua Preston

About The Choreography

Michelle Manzanales' *Con Brazos Abiertos* is a work inspired by Manzanales' inherent struggle being a Mexican-American living in America. She brings the audience to a specific, moment in her life during her childhood in Texas. She explores with humility, nostalgia, and humor the iconic Mexican symbols she was reluctant to embrace when she was younger. She felt constantly caught between two different cultures, and many times alienated from each of them. The piece evolves in a celebration of culture and search for identity and belonging. In the words of Ms. Manzanalez: "*Con Brazos Abiertos* is about embracing all sides and aspects of yourself, of your life. *Con Brazos Abiertos* is embracing who you are."

About the Choreographer

Michelle Manzanales is a choreographer and dance educator originally from Houston, TX. Before being named Director of the School of Dance in December of 2016, Ms. Manzanales was in the midst of her seventh season as the Ballet Hispánico Company Rehearsal Director & Artistic Associate. Her choreography *Con Brazos Abiertos*, premiered during Ballet Hispánico's 2017 spring season at The Joyce Theater. This "savvy but deeply sincere mediation on her Mexican-American background (Marina Harss, *The New York Times*) has since toured extensively to critical acclaim including its inclusion in New York City Center's 2018 Fall for Dance Festival. "This dance isn't just about one girl's experience; it applies to everyone, of any gender, and of any culture," said *CriticalDance*. Other acclaimed works by Ms. Manzanales include her 2010 homage to Frida Kahlo, *Paloma Querida*, which was hailed a "visual masterpiece" by Lucia Mauro of the *Chicago Tribune* and was described by the *Chicago Sun-Times* as a "gorgeously designed, richly hallucinatory, multi-faceted vision of the artist." Her 2007 choreography for Luna Negra Dance Theater, entitled *Sugar in the Raw* (*Azucar Cruda*), was applauded by the *Chicago Sun-Times* as a "staggering, beautiful, accomplished new work."



Artistic Components

Music

Most music used in *Con Brazos Abiertos* refers to Ms. Manzanales' life. She uses different songs, poems, and dialogues that reflect different memories and moments in her life. One section from the movie *Selena* stands out: "...Being Mexican-American is tough, we gotta prove to the Mexicans how Mexican we are, and we gotta prove to the Americans how American we are. We gotta be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans, all at the same time! It's exhausting!"

Props

The choreographer uses the traditional Mexican hat (*sombrero*) in two sections. In both sections, the *sombrero* is used as a symbol. Sometimes the prop is used as a symbol of celebration and culture, an icon of Mexican traditions. Other times, the prop is used to hide as well as, a symbol that could represent weight, perhaps a burden.

Vocabulary

Symbol

Something used for or regarded as representing something else; a material object representing something, often something immaterial; emblem, taken, or sign.

Acculturation

Assimilation to a different culture, typically the dominant one.

Immigrant

A person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country.

Diaspora

The dispersion of any people from their original homeland.

Guiding Questions

1. What do childhood stories tell us about our values, experiences, and beliefs?
2. What symbols do you see in your everyday life that are a recollection of your cultural identity? These can reflect multiple aspects of your identity.
3. Which cultural symbols do you identify with in the piece?

Classroom Activities

Activity A: Think about some symbols related to your culture or to your family. Transform those symbols into shapes with your body. Use more than one symbol and give each symbol a shape. Thread the shapes together to create a small movement phrase.

Activity B: Select one phrase or paragraph from the poem "Con Brazos Abiertos" by Maria Billini that resonates with you. Use a medium of expression to represent your choice, and explain why it connects to you. Represent this with a painting, photography, movement, a poem, or song. Get creative!



Additional Resources

- [Behind the Scenes: Con Brazos Abiertos](#)
- Poem “Con Brazos Abiertos” by Maria Billini

CON BRAZOS ABIERTOS

Que es ahora?
Con brazos abiertos
I bring myself to you
a bronzed goddess
of native and foreign tongues.
Mírame,
una mujer with eyes
black like distant galaxies.
Lips abundant,
exploding stars,
hips carved
from ancient pyramids.
I am her.
I am here.
I am. Yo soy el presente, el pasado,
y todo lo que te espera.
Are you listening?
Gliding in and out
of two worlds
that collide and combine
and will never fully be mine.
Escúchame ...
My language,
this culture of Latin warriors,
these kisses of fire,
these hot plates of jalapeño ecstasy.
Estoy aquí...
con brazos abiertos,
without criminality or apologies,
without the heat of shame,
without chains, or borders,
or green paper work.
Instead there are green pastures,
sombreros, tortillas, familia, maíz, arroz con frijoles, newspapers, música, inventions, libros and blue
prints. Engineers and painters,
poets and lovers.
Mírame...
My hair long black strands of defiance,
of protest, of voters, of builders,
of fighters, of mothers, of daughters.
Una Madonna Bonita,
peligrosa but sweet
like piñas y mangos,
like apple pie and ice cream.
Pero linda en mi ropa,
beautiful in my skin.
A moving mountain.
A breathing testament.
I am here
con brazos
abiertos.

