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Exploring the Majesty and Mystery of Sor Juana in Dance

Michelle Manzanales's new work for Ballet Hispánico is, she says, "a way of going personal through another person's story."

By Marina Harss

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A dancer struggles and falls, again and again. She bends her back deeply and twists on the floor as the people around her watch, curious but withdrawn. We hear the sound of writing, graphite against paper. As couples pass by, the dancer leaps and rolls, flying and landing heavily, looking side to side as if seeking refuge.

The dancer, viewed at a recent rehearsal of Ballet Hispánico, portrays the 17th-century Mexican writer Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in a scene depicting a moment early in her life, when she was living at the court of the viceroys in colonial Mexico. The movement suggests feelings of isolation and yearning for freedom. Sor Juana's life is the subject of a new work by the choreographer Michelle Manzanales that premieres on June 1, during Ballet Hispánico's season at the New York City Center.

Sor Juana, born out of wedlock into a deeply patriarchal society, chose the convent over marriage and domesticity. Despite the odds, she became one of the most noted writers and thinkers in Latin America, whose works, still read in school, are the subject of countless studies. (In Mexico, her face appears on the 100-peso note.) She is intriguing not only because of her extraordinary achievement but because not much is known about her beyond the few clues she left in her writing.

Robles and Sprauve, who plays Sor Juana, rehearsing. The ballet, about Sor Juana's life, explores the possibility that she loved women. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Manzanales, the director of Ballet Hispánico's school of dance, is Mexican American and grew up with these images and resonances of Sor Juana, but recently she realized how little she really knew. So she dived in.

"Sor Juana has always sort of been around me," she said after rehearsal at Ballet Hispánico's studios on the Upper West Side. "I used to have conversations with my mom about her. And when I started reading more, I was intrigued by all the different things she did, and the things she was fighting for at that time, and how relevant they are even today."

A ravenous intellect, largely self-taught, Sor Juana wrote on subjects as varied as astronomy, music, religion and love; her poetry is considered a shining example of Spanish Baroque style. She spent her adult life in a convent, secluded from worldly matters, but nevertheless held tertulias — literary and artistic salons — attended by intellectuals and courtiers.

She was also a feminist before the word or concept existed, who, in a public letter written in 1691 to a church superior, defended a woman's ability and right to dedicate herself to the pursuit of knowledge and writing, not just prayer or raising children.

“Sor Juana has always sort of been around me,” said Manzanales, center, here working with Robles, left and Sprauve. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

But shortly after sending the letter, she gave up her studies and her library, reaffirmed her religious vows and devoted the rest of her life to caring for her fellow nuns. It is not known whether she was forced, or chose to turn away from her life of the mind. She died at 44 of an unnamed plague that devastated Mexico.

Like the record of Sor Juana’s life, Manzanales’s new dance contains a series of impressions, drawn from threads in her writings. Most intriguing, perhaps, is the possibility, explored by contemporary scholars, that she may have loved women. “Given the total aversion I felt toward the idea of marriage,” she wrote in her 1691 letter, convent life “was the least unreasonable and most decent choice I could make.”

To tell this side of Sor Juana’s story, Manzanales has created a stately, intimate passage for two women, Gabrielle Sprauve and Isabel Robles, a quietly grounded, muscular conversation suggesting an aching desire for connection. It is the heart of the ballet.

At a recent rehearsal, Sprauve, who is dancing the role of Sor Juana, walked on, slowly, to the sound of church bells. A Baroque melody for the guitar by Sor Juana — yes, she also composed music — could be heard.

Then Robles entered. Despite the strong gravitational pull between the two women, for a long time they did not touch. Until finally, they leaned in, their lips almost touching.

The pas de deux was constructed over time, little by little. “Michelle was really adamant about the building of their connection,” Sprauve said, “showing the relationship when they first see each other, and the way they ask themselves, ‘What is it I’m feeling?’”

Robles and Sprauve. “Michelle was really adamant about the building of their connection,” Sprauve said, “showing the relationship when they first see each other, and the way they ask themselves, ‘What is it I’m feeling?’” Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

As the attraction builds, a voice recites, in Spanish, one of Sor Juana's elaborate and vivid love poems: "In liquid form you see and touch my heart, unmade, undone, in your hands." The two caress, and Sor Juana folds the other woman into her arms.

"It is my favorite moment," Sprauve said, "because not only are we finally touching, but we're supporting each other. I lift her on my shoulders. People don't expect us to be able to do something like that as women. People in the room kept saying, 'Wow, you are strong.'"

Showing Sor Juana's strength in the face of the struggles she would have experienced as a 17th-century nun, held back by the power of church and societal convention, was important to Manzanales. "I'm surrounded by artists and the arts, and they've shown me so many different identities," she said. "I think that it's important that art show those challenges."

It was also important to her, she said, that the dancers be able to connect with Sor Juana's struggle, and through it, reveal something of themselves. "How do you show the aspects of her story that are still relevant, and not only to women?" she said. "It's about people having the permission to be their authentic selves."

She remembers growing up Catholic in Texas and becoming aware that the church condemned homosexuality. "I think the first time I started to question the church was when I made the connection with my dance teacher, growing up, who was homosexual," she said. "When I realized the church was against this beloved person, it was a really hard thing for me."

Sprauve and Manzanales, who wanted to show aspects of Sor Juana's life that are still relevant — and not only to women. "It's about people having the permission to be their authentic selves," she said. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Manzanales's works have often explored themes drawn from her experience as a Mexican American woman. Her 2017 work for Ballet Hispánico, "Con Brazos Abiertos," was an ode to her confused sense of cultural identity, with references to everything from the subversive

comic duo Cheech and Chong to the meltingly sincere boleros of the 1940s and ’50s. “Frida!” (2010), for the company Luna Negra, was inspired by the life of the artist Frida Kahlo.

“It was a way of going personal through another person’s story,” Manzanales said of her Kahlo piece. “And now I’m back there again.”

The challenge with Sor Juana, she said, was deciding how to depict a subject at once so prolific and so enigmatic. With the help of a dramaturg, the scholar Kiri Avelar, Manzanales explored Sor Juana’s writings and the many interpretations that have been developed by academics and writers over time.

“We were both interested in thinking about Sor Juana through a Latina feminist perspective, and what it means to honor someone and to create a work that brings to light who they were,” said Avelar, now a doctoral student in theater and dance at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She helped gather materials: poems, essays, analyses of Sor Juana’s writings and life.

Rehearsing a scene from “Sor Juana.” Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Manzanales in turn brought these materials to the dancers. “Sor Juana” evolved gradually and organically out of conversations in the studio. Borrowing a term from Latina feminist methodologies — but also from everyday life — she referred to this workshop-style approach as “pláticas,” the Spanish word for conversations. Out of these pláticas, Manzanales and the dancers would develop movement material. “I invited the dancers into the process,” she said. “Each of them was a contributor to discussions around the piece.”

The discussions were personal. “I was asking them to think about their own struggles,” Manzanales said. Those struggles were folded into the choreography. In one section, each dancer told a story about an important relationship in her life, through movement. “They reflected on the heartache of forbidden love, the love between fathers and sons, other kinds of love and the complications of all those things.”

The result is an episodic work that distills themes of loneliness, desire, creativity, power and powerlessness, which Manzanales hopes will be relatable to anyone. Toward the end, Sprauve disappears into a clump of dancers. Sor Juana's singular experience becomes part of a more universal story.

At that moment, Manzanales said, all of the dancers become aspects of Sor Juana. "It's like they're all echoes of her," she said. "I wanted to create a mirror so that everyone can see themselves onstage."

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