

# Choreographer Rosie Herrera Reinvents the Showgirl for Ballet Hispanico

By Artburst Miami

Published Thu., Jun. 5 2014 at 10:30 AM

Rosie Herrera learned young that a show girl is never the star of the show. As a teenager working the cabaret at the Teatro Bellas Artes in Little Havana in the early aughts, she posed prettily on the side of the stage, jutting out her hip to display her costume, and extending her arms to frame the featured comedian. She never forgot what it felt like to be a piece of sexy scenery.

"You have a humungous emotional experience, and you have to suppress it for the greater good -- or, in this case, for the prettier picture," she says in an interview a few days before the premiere at the [Arsht Center of the Performing Arts](#) this weekend of her new work, "Show.Girl."



**Rosie Herrera instructs her "showgirls."**  
Photo by Paula Lobo

Even after achieving success as a choreographer for the concert stage, with her work commissioned by prestigious presenters such as the Arsht Center and the American Dance Festival, Herrera kept thinking about the flourishes and poses of her showgirl days. The memories were all the more poignant not only because she outgrew her old job, but because the whole profession appeared to be dying out as the old-style spectacles have given way to never-ending Celine Dion concerts, Cirque de Soleil shows, and superstar club DJs.

At first, Herrera planned for "Show.Girl" to be a series of autobiographical solos performed by former showgirls and showboys from Havana, Miami, and Las Vegas, all forced by the changing entertainment industry to move on to new professions. "Show.Girl" would finally give them a chance to take center stage.

But Herrera's plans took another direction in 2012, when she participated in the Choreography Institute hosted by the Ballet Hispanico, the foremost Latino dance company in the United States.

In a phone interview from the company's offices on Manhattan's Upper West Side, artistic director Eduardo Vilaro explains that he established the Institute to "enable emerging Latinos and Latinas to create work." He invited Herrera to the institute after seeing a video excerpt of her work, "Dining Alone."

"Her images were so intoxicating," he recalls. "I loved how she used an ordinary, everyday activity to create a profound piece of art."

The Institute turned out to be a big challenge for Herrera, who had created all of her earlier work in Miami, over a period of years, with a tightknit group of frequent collaborators. Now she had just a few weeks to establish a relationship with a group of dancers who not only did not know her, but who were also unfamiliar with the world of the showgirl.

Herrera showed the Ballet Hispanico dancers video of cabaret shows, and other popular Latin entertainment that presented women as decoration, such as the "Gatitas de Porcel" -- the "kitty cats" who appeared on the television show of Argentine comic Jorge Porcel. While putting together a section of "Show.Girl" inspired by the Gatitas, Herrera says she asked the dancers to "dissect" the kitty cat's movements.

Present to me your glorified hip, she commanded. Put your shoulder on display.



**Photo by Paula Lobo**

The dancers' rigorous training allowed them to respond with movements few showgirls could ever attempt.

"The high level of dancers allowed me to take a lot of physical risks," Herrera observes, allowing her to express the emotional intensity of the showgirl experience through the dancers' technical virtuosity.

In a video documenting the creative process in the Ballet Hispanico studios, Herrera invites six female dancers to imagine that they are standing around a pair of acrobats and asks them to make gestures to direct the audience's attention to the main act. Only there are no acrobats; the dancers gesture faster and faster at the empty space in front of them. The showgirls are the main act.



**Photo by Paula Lobo**

By contrast, male dancers appear briefly, and then only to hold the feathers that frame the women. As Herrera explains, "The men are used more as props."

But what really helped the Ballet Hispanico dancers understand what Herrera was looking for was an exercise in which she asked them to sing the songs their mothers used to sing for them.

Show me what a mother does, she asked.

"That shifted the energy," the choreographer remembers. Exploring the power of the mother helped the dancers understand what Herrera sees as the "glorification of the female form" or the "otherworldly feminine power" of showgirls, who in Cuba were referred to as Diosas de Carne (Goddesses of the flesh).

Taking a closer look at the power of what she calls the "showgirl aesthetic," Herrera says, "helped me to deconstruct how femininity and masculinity are defined, especially in Latino culture."

Or as Vilaro puts it, Herrera "reaches into the social qualities of [Latino] culture and turns them upside down."

And that, he says, is exactly what he looks for as an artistic director in adding to the permanent repertory of Ballet Hispanico.

*Ballet Hispanico performs an evening of dance, including the premiere of Rosie Herrera's "Show.Girl" and Eduardo Vilaro's "Danzón, with live music by the Paquito D'Rivera Ensemble, at 8 p.m. on Friday and Saturday at the Ziff Ballet Opera House at the Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, 1300 Biscayne Blvd., Miami. Tickets cost \$30-\$90; 305-949-6722; [arshtcenter.org](http://arshtcenter.org).*

--Celeste Fraser

Delgado, [artburstmiami.com](http://artburstmiami.com)



**Photo by Paula Lobo**

Accessed on July 24, 2014 at 4:29pm from

[http://blogs.miaminewtimes.com/cultist/2014/06/rosie\\_herrera\\_learned\\_young\\_that.php](http://blogs.miaminewtimes.com/cultist/2014/06/rosie_herrera_learned_young_that.php)