

July 02, 2014Arts » Theater

Miami choreographer Rosie Herrera discusses her 2014 American Dance Festival showstopper, *Show.Girl*.

By [Chris Vitiello](#)



[Photo by Grant Halverson](#)

Ballet Hispanico whipping up a frenzy in Rosie Herrera's Show.Girl.

Since her first visit as a resident artist in 2009, Miami's Rosie Herrera has become an [American Dance Festival](#) mainstay. Her company visited in 2010, 2011 and 2013, premiering ADF commissions that established Herrera's reputation as an emotionally powerful, intellectually rigorous dance-maker.

Herrera's 2014 ADF commission also represents a new direction for her *Show.Girl*—which had its world premiere June 6 at Miami's [Adrienne Arsht Center](#)—is her first piece made for another company, [Ballet Hispanico](#), which performed it as part of its ADF program two weeks ago.

Show.Girl stems from Herrera's ongoing interest in Latina identity and its sometimes-bizarre social frames, and teases out subtler threads of empowerment and entrapment than her previous work. It draws upon personal history as well—as a high schooler, Herrera was a showgirl in a Little Havana cabaret.

In the first sections of the piece, women tick off conventional roles as wizened matriarchs, bawdy performers, introspective individuals and sassy girlfriends. Then the emotional levels spike in the stunning imagery of the last three sections. The women whip their hair wildly to an aggressive Ennio Morricone soundtrack. Later, one is contained by a luxuriant ring of white feather fans, held by men, to the strains of 10cc's "[I'm Not in Love](#)." In a brief coda, women stand almost motionless, in spectacular silver regalia, beneath a shower of silver glitter.

We sat down with Herrera to talk about the arresting piece, the importance of hysteria and the razor-thin line between critiquing and embodying sexism.

INDY: *How did you become a dancer?*

ROSIE HERRERA: I was always dancing. I always had a demon in my pelvis. I started street dancing, urban dance with beat boys and house dancers. That was my first foray into movement and choreography.

And I did theater, but my voice didn't mature until I was about 24—which is interesting because some people might say it still hasn't matured. I kept getting typecast as a hooker, a damsel in distress, a child. I liked being on stage and moving my body but I hated speaking. So I thought, "Oh, I'll be a mime."

I went to the University of Florida and studied with Marcel Marceau's former mime partner. It was like a lightning bolt—I thought "Oh, there's a form. This is something I can do." I've always been really interested in what is the same across boundaries—socially, culturally, financially. What unites is interesting and telling to me.

But the minute I started dancing, I thought, "Screw everything else."

In your work, you have a lot to say.

I have a lot of stuff to say but I like to set up experiences for people to feel. It's important for me to create an atmosphere where the dancers have an experience and the audience goes along for the ride with them.

Whatever comes up for you comes up for you. But it's less important to know what I mean.

You have always worked with your own dancers, but you made Show.Girl. with Ballet Hispanico. What did you do with the company to get to know them?

We watched a *telenovela* together, a soap opera. It's so over-the-top and crazy, but I asked them to look at it as if we were an alien species and didn't understand what they were saying. We looked at the physicality and drama of the faces and we memorized it. Then we picked four of those expressions and repeated them over and over, removing the subtext. I told them, "Remember those facial expressions and translate them to your hips."

There was another day when I came to rehearsal just exhausted. I just said, "Show me what a mother does." I had thought about a thousand ways to get at "mother." That was the shifting point in *Show.Girl*. The minute I said "Show me what a mother does," we began to work as an ensemble from there. It softened everybody up.

Ennio Morricone is my co-pilot. It was really exciting to have his music in the piece.

He can do no wrong. But do you know how hard I tried to get that song out of the piece?

Why? It's so perfect with the women whipping their hair up and down in the central section.

I struggled with it. I had originally conceived of a set with a white staircase. The women were supposed to stand on it with their heads down and descend the staircase [to the Morricone music]. So when the staircase

was gone, I thought, "Well, now this doesn't make any sense. Let me get rid of it." But it kept coming back, because you know what? Hysteria works. We needed that moment of hysteria.

The whipping hair was what I was watching, and the bodies vanished.

It was like animals.

It was like pelts—animals without organs.

Skin bags, exactly. Maybe if I end up doing a full evening of that piece, I'll have a staircase. But I'm really happy with what we discovered without it. That pushed me to think in a different way about that section.

The last three sections have such decisive imagery. Did these images come to you as a series or separately?

Every piece that I do has three reference points. One is a very deep emotional and personal nugget I'm exploring. Another is my intellectual interest. The last is what I'm aesthetically drawn to—in this piece, the showgirl aesthetic. I was interested in deconstructing it, abstracting it, seeing how it informed the body and the emotional experience. Intellectually, and as a woman, I'm interested in how we construct our ideas of femininity and masculinity. But the nugget for me was that idea of having a humongous emotional experience and then having to compress it for the greater good.

In the feather section, it was important to me to use the men as props to frame something. The woman is being affected by being within a frame. It creates a sensation, a physical reaction, when she feels the feathers on her. I told the dancer, it's like when you're trying to talk but someone keeps putting their hand over your mouth. I did that with her. I said, "It's really important that you tell me this sentence" and I just never let her talk. I physically manipulated her. That's the place that she's working from.

In the final section, when the women are in the silver bikini outfits—I struggle with this because I consider myself a feminist, but it's difficult to talk about the thing without being the thing. I don't want to be talking about how women are hyper-sexualized and then put them in hyper-sexualized costumes.

But when we were exploring the theatricality of the costumes, they were made to be otherworldly. The way the women carry themselves in the costumes—that's why ballet dancers are showgirls. They carry things up. You don't see a showgirl residing backwards in her body. It's up and out, majestic. So, in essence, it's a glorification of the female form.

It doesn't mean that it didn't go bad and go bad fast. But it really was about that glorification. I wanted to end with them frozen in that idea. They don't really go anywhere. Nothing really happens. They're just stuck in the confines of this costume, this identity. And yet, I feel like we won in the end—because of the glitter.

This article appeared in print with the headline "Hysteria works"