

Eddy Vilaro Named Chicagoan of the Year

Eduardo Vilaro, a member of the NJDTE Advisory Board and long time dancer in our company's production of *The Nutcracker*, was recently named Chicagoan of the Year by the Chicago Tribune. Eddy was recognized for his groundbreaking work in building, from scratch, one of Chicago's premier dance companies – Luna Negra Dance Theatre – rooted in a new and exciting Latino interpretive style. Eddy was honored along with Gerald Arpino, Director of Chicago's renowned Joffrey Ballet. Please join me in congratulating Eddy on this exciting recognition. – Nancy Turano, Artistic Director

CHICAGOANS OF THE YEAR: DANCE

Eduardo Vilaro: Luna Negra explores Latino heritage

Eduardo Vilaro launched Luna Negra Dance Theater in 1999 with only four other dancers.

Performing at first in small theaters, the company enjoyed rapid, phenomenal growth, culminating this year with a stint at the Ravinia Festival and a sold-out concert downtown at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance.

New troupes come and go, or hang around and barely grow at all. In a half-dozen years, Luna Negra has blossomed into a company of 10 dancers with a repertory of unusual, original work distinguished by its decidedly Latino slant.

"I set out to purge everything I had inside and experiment with new ideas," Vilaro says of his decision to launch a dance company. "I wanted to work with choreographers who would explore their Latino heritage and add that culture and identity to their creations."

What he did not want was folk dance. What he and Luna Negra offer instead is serious contemporary fare grounded in an ethnic sensibility he believes is underexplored in American dance.

"I was always impressed by the number of top African-American choreographers who sprang from

the Alvin Ailey company," he says. "But there just weren't any real Latino parallels, and yet, it's such a huge and growing population."

Vilaro, 41, born in Cuba, moved to the Bronx at age 5 with his family and had to fight to practice his art. Bitten by the dance bug in 8th grade, cast as Linus in "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown," he wasn't at first allowed to take dance lessons.

"The stigma of a Latino male in dancing was heavy in my family," he says. At 16, he enrolled in a martial arts course, sneaking across the hall into the nearby dance class instead.

He eventually became a professional and danced for 10 years with Ballet Hispanico, the important New York troupe also devoted to Hispanic culture. But, for Vilaro, for all its achievements, the troupe doesn't go far enough in developing Latino choreographers.

"I felt it was mostly a Latino company performing works by non-Latino choreographers, like Peter Pucci and Ann Reinking,"



he says. "That was important in terms of getting established, but it didn't speak to the experience of Latinos."

A prolific choreographer himself, Vilaro assembled a small but worldwide choreographic network. He enlisted Spain's Gustavo Ramirez Sansano while he was visiting here to work with Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. He found Miguel Mancillas on a trip through Mexico. Last fall, the troupe premiered a work by Cuban-born Septime Webre, artistic director of the Washington Ballet. Another contributor is Hubbard Street alumnus Ron DeJesus. Venezuela and Argentina are also represented. That mix of various backgrounds helps keep Luna Negra eclectic, progressive and surprising.

Two years ago, the troupe added a full-time managing director, and last fall's Harris Theater concert (Vilaro credits part of its success to the Mexican Fine Arts Museum) was a definite leap, a "skyrocket of change."

"The baby became a toddler," he says. "And the toddler's a young guy running rampant."

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