

BWW Review: True Love Survives After Death in DIA DE LOS MUERTOS

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Olga El



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Fusing folkloric Mexican dances and ballet, Calpulli Mexican Dance Company's *Dia de los Muertos* is a dazzling display of color and culture. I saw the final performance of this year's run, on November 4th, at the historic Town Hall in Midtown. Written and choreographed by Roberto Lara, with artistic direction by Alberto C. Lopez Herrera and musical direction by George Saenz, *Dia de los Muertos* is a love story that celebrates both the beauty of life as well as the transition known as death.

In the first act we are introduced to the lovers, Lupita (Abril Anchondo Reynaga) and Raúl (Alonso Ojeda), amidst a celebration that involves their entire town. The impressive strength, endurance, coordination and teamwork of the cast shines through a series of dance numbers featuring whirlwinds of skirts in every hue, vigorous footwork and partnerwork, and Lupita's balletic elegance.

The festivities are a lovely distraction from the treachery of the town millionaire, Maximilliano (Juan Castaño.) Despite her relationship with Raúl, Lupita is sold off to Maximilliano by her own father, Don José (Ricardo Lopez.) When Lupita rejects Maximilliano, and he is further humiliated by losing a dance-off duel to Raúl, he devises a plot to poison Raúl which backfires and kills Lupita instead.

In Act II we are transported to Mictlán, the realm of the dead in Aztec lore, where the Queen of the underworld, La Catrina (Roberto Lara), greets the audience with a lengthy *pas seul*. In contrast to previous balletic solos, hers is more simple, her demeanor more refined. My only critique might be that I wish our first introduction to the Queen was more grandiose!

Eventually, though, the Queen's spirited court joins her, in costumes even more magnificent than those of the living, and the larger ensemble of dancers once again dazzles. I must also take a moment to commend the diverse range of influences in the fantastic musical score. Elements of jazz, classical and Mexican folk music combine to really immerse audiences in the worlds depicted on the stage.

When La Catrina learns of Lupita's heartache, over not being able to say "Farewell" to Raúl, she gives the lovers a chance to enjoy one last dance in the world of the living. Raúl is assured he will see his love again in the afterlife, alleviating the depression he'd felt since Lupita's passing.

The show closes on a happy note, with the townsfolk all celebrating the Day of the Dead. Once again flying skirts, exuberant partnerwork, and even a hair-raising number featuring clashing machetes, boasts the incredible skill (and necessary trust) amongst the team of performers and again distracts from a more subtle scene onstage: a reinvigorated Raúl who has finally decided to leave offerings at his lover's grave.

With its emphasis on honoring the transition of death, as well as those who have passed on and the undying power of love, *Dia de los Muertos* exemplifies the roots of the commercial holiday we now know as Halloween. If *The Nutcracker* is the go-to performance of the Winter months, *Dia de los Muertos* should be made canon for the Fall.<



More From This Author

Olga El is happy to combine her love of writing and dance for Broadway World. Taking a cue from her ballet-trained parents, she began studying dance at a young age but had to take hiatus from the dance world in her teens. At 17 she moved to NYC to study writing at Pratt Institute and began studying various forms of dance while earning her BFA.



Since that time she has worked directly under the leadership of several dance companies in the genres of Modern/Contemporary, Ballet and Hip Hop as well as folkloric forms from around the world. She directs a political dance-theatre that was honored with a residency from the Jamaica Performing Arts Center in 2015 and has been presented across the NYC-Metro area. Olga's scriptwriting was recently solicited by a major Off-Broadway theatre.