

DANCE

## Review: When La Catrina Met Giselle

By BRIAN SEIBERT NOV. 7, 2017

La Catrina, the skeleton lady of the Mexican Day of the Dead celebrations, began life as satire. An etching of a skeleton wearing a fancy French hat sent up the pretensions of rich Mexicans who tried to pass for European.

“Dia de los Muertos,” the show that the Calpulli Mexican Dance Company presented at Town Hall on Saturday, might seem to have a similar anxiety about the worth of Mexican culture in relation to that of Europe’s. It takes Mexican folklore and the folk dance that is the specialty of this large-spirited, Queens-based troupe and crosses them with French ballet.

Here, the music of Mictlán, the Aztec underworld, comes from the 19th-century French ballet “Giselle” and is played live, in a Mexican-styled arrangement, by George Sáenz’s capable band. Roberto Lara, Calpulli’s choreographer in residence, dances the character of La Catrina, the queen of Mictlán, in a many-layered floral skirt, skull makeup and pointe shoes.

Mr. Lara has performed in the past with Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, the all-male dance company famous for its loving parodies of old-fashioned ballets. But “Dia de los Muertos” is entirely in earnest, expressing a love for Romantic ballet that doesn’t displace a love of Mexican culture.

The story, also by Mr. Lara, could be from a 19th-century ballet: Lupita loves Raúl, but her father arranges a marriage for her with the local rich guy, Maximiliano. When Maximiliano gives Raúl poison, Lupita drinks it instead. Her Giselle-like death while dancing ends Act I.

Act II transpires in the underworld. Mr. Lara presides in the manner of Myrtha, who in “Giselle” is the queen of the Wilis, the jilted, avenging female spirits. Yet where Myrtha is merciless, La Catrina is a softy. Quoting Myrtha’s steps with large-shouldered grace and delicacy, Mr. Lara is ultrafeminine and mothering.

This underworld is a cozy, colorful land of music and dance. Apart from a few more guys in drag — identified in the program as “muxes,” a third gender in Zapotec culture — it’s an all-female refuge from venal men like Maximiliano. Yet Lupita misses Raúl, so La Catrina allows her to visit him in Act III.

Mr. Lara’s conventional choreography mostly succeeds. The dance numbers keep coming — feet stamping, skirts swirling — as narrative turns are woven in with easy-to-follow clarity. The lines of female dead, crossing one another to the same accelerating music to which the Wilis cross, have the same effect as the original, heightened by richer colors. And the hopeful ending allows the men to finish with their forte, striking machetes together under high kicks.

Too generous and innocent to be pretentious, with its subversion of gender norms wrapped up in its sincerity, “Dia de los Muertos” might expand your idea of what is traditional.

Dia de los Muertos

Performed Nov. 4 at Town Hall, Manhattan; [calpullidance.org](http://calpullidance.org).

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