

Mexican modern dance troupe's performance at Ziff Ballet Opera House 'invigorating'

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Tania Pérez-Salas Compañía de Danza stunned the audience at the Adrienne Arsht Center's on Saturday night with breathtaking imagery and startling sensuality. The Mexican modern dance troupe's performance was an invigorating glimpse of an unexpected and original vision, and the audience that filled the Ziff Ballet Opera House rewarded her and her thirteen fantastic dancers with a long standing ovation.

With its dramatic lighting and sweeping stage compositions, the Mexico City choreographer's work has often been described as cinematic. Those heroic qualities, and the impact of Pérez-Salas' dances in general, owe a great deal to the brilliant work of lighting and scenic designer Xochitl González Quintanilla. Her designs were integral to two of the three dances on Saturday's program, 2010's "Ex-Stasis" and 1998's "Waters of Forgetfulness."

But perhaps the intensity of Pérez-Salas' dances also has something in common with Mexican films such as "Amores Perros," in their sense of a life that can be overwhelming in its darkness, beauty and sheer power.

The program notes for "Ex-Stasis" (which could be a play on "ecstasy" or "no longer static" describe the destructive way that modern life suffocates our physical and emotional impulses. Set mostly to droning vocal or pulsing electronic music, "Ex-Stasis" opened with Pérez-Salas convulsing in a wild go-go dance, while the dancers watched limply. Quintanilla's enormous opalescent white and shimmering silver curtains divided the stage, billowed above or rippled like water across it; her lighting turned the fabric opaque or transparent by turns, creating a shifting, overwhelming universe.

The dancers struggled behind or under the enormous fabrics, often grabbing or hurling themselves at them as if trying to break through. Sometimes they moved with thrusting hips and heaving torsos startling -- even discomfiting -- for their uninhibited sensuality, even as the dancers seemed disconnected from their impulses that ripped their bodies.

The opening piece, "3.Fourteen Sixteen," also made a monumental impression. Set designer Jorge Ballina's six towering panels, white on one side, black on the other, rotated to float ominously overhead, or form a giant segmented wall that forced the dancers to the front or back, while Quintanilla's dramatic white cones and squares of light isolated them even further. The music, by Vivaldi and other Baroque composers, was ornate yet relentless, and Pérez-Salas set the dancers flying with an equally urgent flurry of limbs.

At one point the dancers emerged from a looming doorway formed by two lifted panels and a cloud of bright white light, nude except for silver trunks, their sweating bodies arching and rippling, both orgiastic and ethereal. "Sixteen" ended with the dancers walking between the panels into tunnels of white light, as if passing into another dimension.

Beautiful as these two dances were, they could be overwhelming in their constant sensory and theatrical grandeur -- as if Pérez-Salas gravitates towards intensity for its own sake.

"Waters of Forgetfulness" was somehow more resonant by being more focused, if no less visually and imaginatively stunning. On a stage covered by a shallow pool of water, the seven dancers whipped their hair to hurl shimmering spray into the air, and swept their limbs so wildly and luxuriantly through the water you could almost feel your own getting soaked. They emerged into a pouring rain of, not water, but sand, as if coming out of the primordial water of creation into our own still startling real world.