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Los Perros del Barrio Colosal
Article

A Dance of Dramatic Contrasts in Omar Román de Jesús's New Film

In the span of twelve minutes, Boca Tuya's new dance film "Los Perros del Barrio Colosal" offers a sweeping story of emotional (and physical) breadth that traverses a landscape spanning profound pain to outright hilarity.

"Los Perros del Barrio Colosal" is the result of a collaboration between choreographer Omar Román de Jesús, filmmaker Drew L. Brown, and six dancers who are members of Román's New York-based company, Boca Tuya. A dance of contrasts that pairs the music of Franz Liszt with that of Lucho Bermúdez, a twentieth-century titan of Colombian music, "Los Perros del Barrio Colosal" weaves together story-like elements with breathless, full-body movement.

Choreographer and artistic director Román professes to have once disliked dance films, but with the outbreak of the pandemic—combined with his deep admiration for Drew L. Brown's work—he decided to test his hand at the genre. Working with six members of his company, Román experiments with both "high" and "low" drama, a combination that suits the versatility of the film medium in a way that will make sense to dance and television lovers alike.

In the opening phrase, a single male dancer, outfitted in trousers and a suit jacket, runs toward the camera, twisting arms and neck and spiraling his body before being joined by a second male dancer, with whom he enacts a violent yet undefined pantomime. Dancing barefoot in an old warehouse, the pair quickly becomes a sextet, moving to the rhythmic brass of Bermúdez's "Homenaje al Gran Lucho."

"Los Perros del Barrio Colosal" does not follow an identifiable story arc, and yet there is story to it. The six dancers adopt a variety of shifting personas through the piece. At times they might be dogs, as the film title suggests, but they also take on more sinister, human roles, pantomiming scenes that could have been drawn straight from the melodrama of television. Despite the ominous characters, it might be these human roles that offer the most levity in the film, as the dancers interject vocally with shouts, cries, and howls that marry dance and theater.

The choreography is fast-paced, as the six dancers perform elaborate upper body contractions, interspersed with shoulder shakes and floor work. A slower, dreamlike interlude, set to a selection from Franz Liszt's "Liebesträume," breaks new emotional ground. The dancers interlink arms and hands, sweeping and surging in harmony. During this section the lighting recedes to a pale darkness that contrasts the bright lights of the faster portions. Meanwhile, the camera reveals new corners and columns in the Civil War-era warehouse where the film is set.

It was not just the lighting that required new ways of working when producing dance on film rather than for the stage. Román explains that one thing he came to enjoy while working on this piece was the ability to have more control over the audience's vision. Using a camera, Román says, "[I can] more closely direct the audience's eyes where I want them to go so they are following the journey that I want them to see." Most importantly, Román reports that he "truly trusted the cinematographer."

Gray masks, the costume accessory that will identify "Los Perros del Barrio Colosal" as a pandemic-era piece long into the future, are used to choreographic effect in the new piece. Dancing alone, the dancers rip off their masks, baring teeth and even lowering their jaws to expose tongues. The unmasking appears to express a sense of exposure, a certain wildness that must be concealed when the dancers are no longer solo. Dancing as a group, the masked dancers seem to be veiled, perhaps hiding something they do not want to share.

Surprisingly, given the way the masks bring new and theatrical elements to the piece, envisioning the "Los Perros del Barrio Colosal" with masked dancers was one of the biggest challenges Román faced as he created the new work. In some moments, he even considered setting the aside work until after the pandemic until a friend and mentor encouraged him to press forward. Then, says Román, he "began trying to make the masks part of the identity of the work."

It is the ability to use melodrama in ways that do not appear forced or trite that makes "Los Perros del Barrio Colosal" a success. The dancers play with comedy, pantomime, and made-for-TV themes in ways that take audience members on a profound emotional journey—one that feels authentic and important. Perhaps most crucially, "Los Perros del Barrio Colosal" inspires the viewer's imagination long after the twelve-minute film has stopped running.