

Impressions of *Cielo Elena*.

“Cielo Elena began with a pair of pants sold at a 60% discount,” says the note accompanying the Vimeo video.* Choreographer Omar Román De Jesús had been browsing for garments to use in a planned duet. He tried these and was so delighted with his find, at \$25 apiece, that he bought multiple pairs, in ‘flesh’ and in black, and started imagining a larger piece. Then, he writes, *As I thought which top would look good with these pants, I realized any top at all will take away from the beauty of the pants. They look to me like an extension of the [dancers’] skin, so the idea of having the whole cast bare chested became evident. The aesthetic of it excited me as I know there is a lot of fear in presenting work like that in the "concert dance scene"... and as I'm trying to figure out my role in the community, this felt to me like a good first step into moving dance forward. We see violence, sex, drugs, etc on TV everyday, somehow in "dance" things feel prudish.* (It’s not just the concert dance world that shrinks from exposed bodies, at least in the US; network television, mainstream films, and newspapers of record among other media sources also shy away.) Within a few hours Omar had contacted dancers and begun a whole new project. He says, *“I called artists I believed would be ok with the costume, and when I asked if they were willing to be topless they all agreed without hesitation as to why that would even be a problem. That certainly gave me confidence and a sense of security. I felt safe diving into the project with them and I was glad they felt safe diving in with me.”***

Cielo Elena thus grew out of the core concept of nude torsos and clothed legs. Once this contrast was posited, as a question or statement uttered, the piece evolved to address it. The juxtaposition of flowing, gauzy, ruffled pants—the way they clothe the legs—against the smooth, polished, sculptural unclothed shapes of the dancers’ bodies, hands and arms, feet, and faces, is at the center of the work, both as its subject and as a major source of its beauty and power. The dancer becomes a kind of hybrid creature, half-human half-bird if you will.

When I mentioned this image in conversation with a friend about the film (which she hadn’t seen yet), she at once asked, “But why *actually* nude upper bodies? Why not skin-colored leotards, if what you’re getting at is a visual contrast between clothes and the bodies that wear them?” My answer was that skin-tight tops and ruffled pants would not offer a real contrast, just one between two levels of clothing, covering more or less. (All of which makes for an interesting discussion but sidesteps the issue of why America, with its violence-saturated popular culture and hand-wringing inability to stop the killing of school children, comes over all moralistic when a choreographer, cinematographer and group of dancers, including women, choose to dance partially clothed.)

Omar more than once characterized the genesis of *Cielo Elena* to me as ‘pure,’ by which I think he means generated on its own terms without the usual preconceptions or strong ideas of a narrative that he usually has in mind before first meeting with the dancers. Since the notion of working with semi-nudity and awareness of the implications of that choice were there before anyone entered the studio, however, one couldn’t really call it ‘pure’ in the sense of no pre-

existing expectations or presumptions (which I don't believe is really possible anyway in any human endeavor or action.) I think the 'purity' of which Omar spoke must rather refer to both the lack of prurience in how semi-nudity is handled in this piece and the way the dancers' initial openness to it appears quite naturally to have grown into an exploration of their attitudes toward their own and others' bodies.

In any experiment of this sort, there is bound to be a combination of co-existing, sometimes even conflicting motives. On one hand, the film's initial image of the naked upper body of a woman does draw something of a line in the sand, putting the half-nudity issue "up front" and making it hard for audience and critics alike to focus attention or commentary on anything else. On the other hand, an attempt (quite successful, in my opinion) is made to treat human bodies in a semi-abstract form as beautiful shapes in complex and elegant motion. Yet because the piece is not, say, a static sculptural study of a single body but includes duets and group segments, it also becomes a study of interacting human beings in their relation to their own and each other's bodies. *Cielo Elena* is, quite aside from the costume question, an aesthetically pleasing work. In addition, there is also some moving physical dialogue between the dancers, including moments of male-male and female-female partnering which, a few years ago, would have been shocking or problematical by a concert audience, but by now are quite close to mainstream. Things do change.

*These comments are also based on emails and Skype conversation with Omar.

