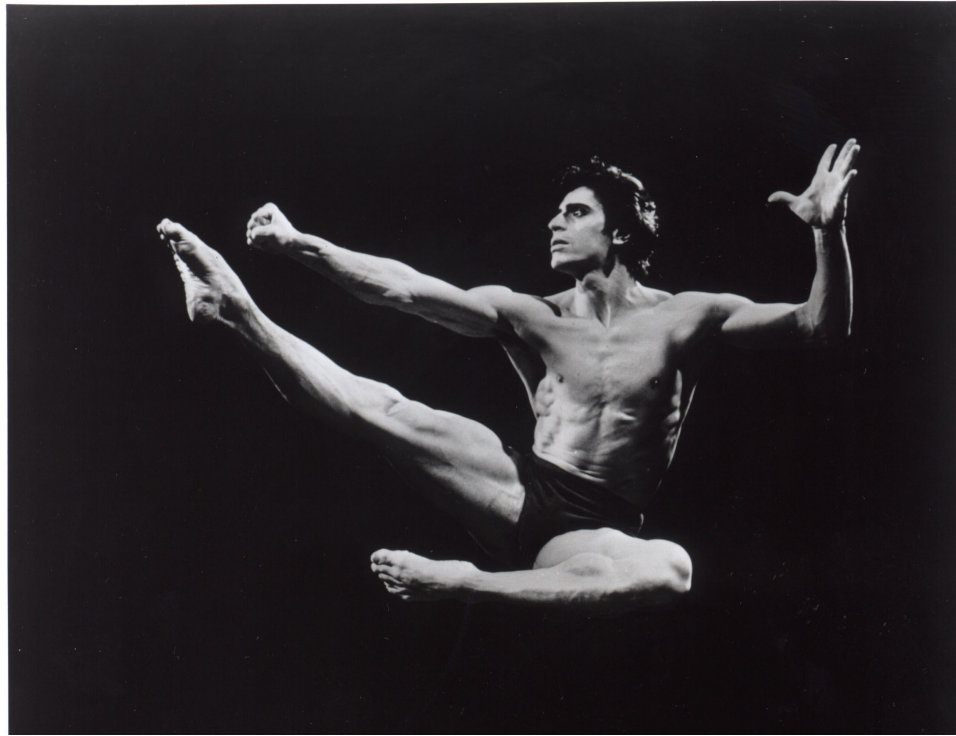


La Opinión

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Guardian of Balanchine

Artistic Director of Miami City Ballet – a company where Latinos excel – Edward Villella has been able to preserve and reveal the legacy of his mentor

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An iconic photograph of Edward Villella caught mid-leap in George Balanchine's *The Prodigal Son* ran in *Life* magazine in 1969. The photo captures the intensity of the darkly handsome man who was then the star male dancer of New York City Ballet.

In the photo, Villella's arms are raised starkly, his eyes flash furiously, and the very veins on his legs pop in taut musculature. Yes, America, real men *can* dance, this photo informs us—and when they

dance with unmasked passion all the better. Based on this media image and on his go-for-broke live performance style, audiences recall Villella as imposing and over scaled.

That's why an encounter with the soft-spoken, dapper, and diminutive gentleman leaves a visitor slightly disoriented. "People tell me all the time that I cannot really be Edward Villella," he says with a laugh. "I guess that on stage I used every square inch that I had." Since retiring as a dancer, Villella has been artistic director of Miami City Ballet performing this

weekend at the Music Center's Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. Villella's passion for dance and for the neo-classical works of his mentor George Balanchine, for whom he danced for two decades, are gloriously evident in the rambunctious troupe Villella has built in Miami from the ground up. Nothing was there; he started from a clean slate. Twenty years later a troupe of 50 dancers, 80 ballets, and an annual budget of \$10 million has dance critics raising their eyebrows—but in a good way.

The consensus in the ballet world is that the 70-year old Villella has

proven a fine caretaker of Balanchine's brilliant legacy of twentieth-century choreography. What was previously unspeakable, and even unimaginable, is now openly expressed: That the short, tough Italian guy from Long Island with blue collar breeding (his dad was a truck driver) has maintained the Balanchine oeuvre better than tall, blonde, princely, Danish-born Peter Martins, who inherited the NYCB mantle upon Balanchine's death in 1983. This is controversial stuff if you care for great art ... or for the little engine that could.

Fifty beautifully trained dancers, many from Central and South America and Cuba, earn year-round salaries because of this man. A repertory of amazing ballets is on view to the public, including works by Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, Paul Taylor, Jose Limon, and Twyla Tharp. Says Vilella: "I am interested in master works. Only."

Coming from the predominantly Anglo world of ballet in the sixties and seventies, Vilella was mildly shocked to arrive in Miami in 1984 where, according to him, "English is not the first language." Nonetheless, he began to systematically tap the local talent: "I was aware that there were wonderfully trained Latin American dancers," he says. "Naturally I knew about the Cubans; I knew about the Venezuelans; and I learned about the Brazilians. These dancers come from grand traditions of state-sponsored theaters and training academies."

"Latinos bring a special physicality to ballet, similar to their instinctual excellence in baseball," he says. "They are famous for their passion and musicality. The passion must be slightly tempered, however, to succeed with the quick, sharp, thrusting attack of neo-classical choreography," he says.

Vilella coached the company's stable of strong Latino dancers to endure the fast, furious, and entwining works of Balanchine. The dancers include Carlos Miguel Guerra (Cuba via Chile), Luis Serrano (Cuba via Venezuela), Katia Carranza (Monterrey, Mexico), Mary Carmen Catoya (Venezuela), Daymel Sanchez (Cuba via Mexico), Renato Penteado (Sao Paolo, Brazil). All are principals, or the highest level of lead dancer in the company.

Miami City Ballet brings a chocolate box of ballet classics to Los Angeles, presented over two programs.

Dances at a Gathering (Jerome Robbins, 1969)

A dance steeped in nostalgia for a lost (and re-found) sense of community. Ten dancers move sumptuously to Chopin waltzes and mazurkas. Robbins first created the ballet as a *pas de deux* for Edward Vilella and Patricia McBride. "When Balanchine came to view Robbins's work in progress," Vilella recalls, "he said two words: *Make more*. That's how DAAG grew into a major hour-long work."

Western Symphony (George Balanchine, 1954)

How would a French-speaking Russian expatriate with a love of Americana combine classical ballet tradition with the wild, Wild West? "When you remove the cowboy hats, string ties, and the bar girl's feather boa, what's left is a great Balanchinean symphonic work, but set to "Red River Valley," says Vilella.

Fancy Free (Jerome Robbins, 1944)

Robbins's seminal first ballet bounces along a frothy score by Leonard Bernstein. Three sailors on leave in New York meet two

girls on a hot summer night. This ballet begot the Broadway musical *On the Town*, which in turn begot the Frank Sinatra/Gene Kelly film. Vilella, a graduate of the New York Maritime Academy, says: "I too was in the Navy, on leave, looking for action and for girls. This delightful period piece rings completely true."

Nine Sinatra Songs (Twyla Tharp, 1982)

"Tharp is a brilliant woman," says Vilella. "She told me that this series of *pas de deux* and group dances represents the view of one single relationship. As a young man, I dated to the sound of Frank Sinatra, so this suite of ballroom dances is very special to me."

Stravinsky Violin Concerto (George Balanchine, 1972)

Set to Igor Stravinsky's Violin Concerto in D, twenty dancers dressed in simple practice clothes claw their way through three movements of abstruse choreography. "The choreographic invention in this piece is glorious; it's witty, delightful, and surprising. The two *pas de deux* at the heart of the ballet are, I believe, Balanchine's depiction of a huge marital spat," says Vilella. "This ballet operates at so many levels and Balanchine was a master of them all," he says.

Asked which job of his two-pronged career—dancer or artistic director—has been the most personally gratifying, Edward Vilella laughs. "I'd do a deal with the devil if I could dance again!" then says, "On the other hand, these ballets took such good care of me for so many years. Now is my turn to care for them."