

## REVIEW: Rosie Herrera Dance Theatre

*Make Believe*  
Rosie Herrera Dance Theatre  
Dance Place  
September 16, 2018  
By Lisa Traiger



Sometimes desperate times call for desperate measures. Other times they call for abundant sequins and a purple bouncy castle. Miami-based choreographer Rosie Herrera and her eponymous Rosie Herrera Dance Theatre returned to Dance Place following an Alan M. Kriegsman Residency, two years ago, where her latest piece incubated. This past weekend her *Make Believe*, a work of magical realism, was filled with both sardonic humor and whimsy, broken hearts and saved souls. There are uneven moments, too, but at the end of 50 minutes, a *deus ex machina* makes it all right.

Herrera is beloved for her inventive dance theater works imbued with personality, striking imagistic motifs, and a moody sensitivity danced beneath her preferred hot tropical colors, spangles and sequins. *Make Believe* begins with six dancers, swathed in white sequins, their faces restrained as they perform a series of ablutions recalling Catholic religious iconography. The tightly animated sequence of hand gestures – the index and middle finger recalling a priestly benediction, the thumb and ring finger meeting in a secret alphabet of holy symbols – performed in unison, finishes with hands clasped in prayer, the dancers trembling – in awe? Or is it fear? Most striking, they brush hands across their bodies, the white sequins turning red, referencing the blood and body of Jesus. Herrera notes her Catholic upbringing as a major influence, but it's not her only inspiration in this work.

From this richly detailed Catholic physical iconography, Herrera leads viewers to wild unfettered dancing. The three women and three men fling themselves, arms and legs akimbo, hair flying, as they stagger to the floor, pulling themselves up only to collapse once more. Here freedom contrasts with the stiff-armed gestural language from moments earlier. And here, too, is perhaps a suggestion of Herrera's Cuban heritage – drawing from both Catholic roots and Afro-Cuban ritual worship, like Santeria, felt in the flat-footed stomping and torsos and hips pumping and bumping. The music collage features sultry torch songs, broken-hearted blues and pounding, trance-inducing club music.

A quiet but telling vignette reveals a frustrated woman, all red faced, flailing arms and tussled hair, assuaged by a cowboy, rescuing her with a kiss, like so many steamy romance novels, again and again.

Later, Loren Davidson hangs her torso out from the side curtain. She appears legless, like a Frida Kahlo amputee. Then we notice she is rigged with straps and ropes, her body pitching forward precariously. As she trudges from one corner to another, she drags a huge canvas-like pillow. The weighty, amorphous clump recalls a refugee raft being pulled ashore; asylum seekers, alas, nowhere to be found.



But then Herrera lightens this heavy image. The raft inflates and what was a burdensome lump becomes the aforementioned bouncy castle. She lets her imagination run unfettered. An icon of childhoods of the 1980s onward – to celebrate birthdays and store openings, the what can the bouncy castle say? In Herrera's world a lot. As a besotted love song croons about love, lust and the heat of desire, the castle inflates and deflates, becoming human for a time. It's Herrera's wink to us: that even amidst her angsty moments, *Make Believe* is very real. The castle like a message in a bottle, that, maybe some wishes do come true.

Photos: Rosie Herrera Dance Theatre in *Make Believe*, top photo by Sally Cohn, bottom by Ben McKeown, courtesy Dance Place

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An arts journalist and critic since 1985, **Lisa Traiger** is thrilled to helm the re-launch of Dance Metro DC's Dance Journalism Project. She wrote the dance column for The Washington Post Weekend section from 1999 to 2014 and was a freelance dance critic for The Washington Post Style section from 1997-2006. As arts correspondent, Traiger's pieces on the cultural and performing arts appear regularly in the Washington Jewish Week. She also contributes to Ballet Review, Dance Magazine, The Forward, Pointe, Dance Studio Life, Sondheim Review, Asian Week, New Jersey Jewish News, Bethesda Magazine, and Washington Review. She edits From the Green Room, *Dance/USA's* online eJournal.

In 2003, Lisa was a New York Times Fellow in the Institute for Dance Criticism at the American Dance Festival in Durham, N.C. She earned an M.F.A. in choreography from the University of Maryland, College Park, and has taught dance appreciation at the UMCP and Montgomery College's Rockville campus. Traiger served on the Dance Critics Association Board of Directors from 1991-93, returned to the board in 2005, and served as co-president in 2006-2007. She served on the advisory board of the Dance Notation Bureau in 2008-2009.