With live music and flamenco dance battles, Cerqua Rivera + Ensemble Español do their greatest hits at the Auditorium

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Ensemble Español Spanish Dance Theater performs “Pasion Oculta” by Irma Suarez Ruiz at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago in October. (Dean Paul photo)

The Made in Chicago dance series is a risk for the Auditorium Theatre. It’s not that we don’t have wonderful dance companies making work in and about Chicago, it’s that the popular organizations who could reliably fill the Auditorium Theatre, the venue that dreamed up this series several years ago, already produce their own concerts at home.

But that’s kind of the point of Made in Chicago, to propel home-grown dance companies who wouldn’t otherwise play to a house as big and beautiful as the Auditorium Theatre. Last season, the venue perfected this formula by pairing companies together in double or triple bills to fill in as many of those plush, more than 3,000 seats as possible. And for the 2019 Made in Chicago fall opener, Cerqua Rivera Dance Theatre (CRDT) and Ensemble Español Spanish Dance Theater, the combination could not have been more perfect.
For either of these company’s usual audiences, Friday’s one-nighter at the Auditorium didn’t bring any surprises; indeed, it was a kind of greatest hits, a compellation of things both companies have presented often, and recently.

CRDT offered its four-part epic on immigration, “American Catracho,” which premiered a week ago at Studios5 after three years in development. Stretching out on the Auditorium’s big stage made a difference for this piece, which, in this iteration, also included projections by Simean Carpenter that weren’t in play at Studio5. Images of water, desert landscapes, fingers clutching a chain link fence and a black and white American flag, like a carbon copy of the red, white and blue original, provided context, but I’m not sure this work needs such literal references to the topics “Catracho” explores. Co-founders Wilfredo Rivera, who choreographed the work, and Joe Cerqua, who composed the score played live by the excellent CRDT band, have so clearly and expertly tapped into the various complexities of immigration and Latin American culture; leaving a little room for ambiguity feels a more poignant path. But it’s long been part of the ethos at Cerqua Rivera to incorporate multiple artistic mediums — a third founder, the late Matt Lamb, was a visual artist — and, in any case, “American Catracho” is this 20-year-old company’s best example of integrating dance, music and projection design cohesively.

After an intermission, Ensemble Español had their turn, dancing eight pieces for what could easily have stood as a concert on its own; indeed, the whole evening clocked in at over 2½ hours. That’s probably too long, but I only really felt the length of the evening standing at the bus stop after the show. The pace of the performance clipped right along, with Ensemble’s pieces coming one right after the other.

The Ensemble’s portion of the night read like a primer on Spanish dance. Beginning with Dame Libby Komaiko’s “Ecos De España,” a folkloric dance set to Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Capriccio Espagnol,” we then journeyed through a plethora of styles: zapateado, farruca, flamenco and contemporary. Ensemble Español is easily and appropriately praised for its ensemble work, most powerful when they all move together, pounding the floor as boisterous arms and big, billowy skirts fill the entire stage. This program certainly did that, but also highlighted individual dancers — first dancer José Torres emerging in a brilliant beam of back light in artistic director Irma Suarez Ruiz’s “Pasión Oculta,” for example, or the exhilarating flamenco dance battles of Carlos Rodriguez’s “Mar de Fuego” and José Barrios’s “Triana.” The highlight of the program for this critic was the return of first dancer Claudia Pizarro, who was on leave for a portion of last season. She offered a 2017 restaging of
executive director Jorge Perez’s “Una Obra De Arte” (1999), a farruca (traditionally a masculine dance performed only by men) she performs surrounded by five of the company’s men. Pizarro also gave us the only world premiere of the night: a solo called “Azabache.” Backed by musicians playing Spanish guitar, violin, percussion and mournful vocals, Pizarro — dressed in a blood red skirt with a long, ruffled train and white top with equally bountiful ruffles in the sleeves— passionately, defiantly stamps her feet, her center of gravity dropped as her hips sway, taunting the audience with every false ending to this carnal dance. Considered together, “Una Obra De Arte” and “Azabache” are a reminder not only of how supremely lucky we are to have Pizarro back on stage, but also the grit, tenacity and sensuality of this company, and Spanish dance as a whole.

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