

Bill Santiago

WHAT'S SO FUNNY ABOUT LATIN DANCE?

BY EVELYN NIEVES

I met Bill Santiago at a rally against the impeachment of President Bill Clinton, back in '98.

This was in San Francisco, so the rally was packed. I was covering the event as the San Francisco bureau chief of the New York Times. Bill was one of the protesters. He saw me with my reporter's pad and marched right up. He was outraged! Outraged! The vast right-wing conspiracy had won, the Democrats had caved, the media was complicit, etc. etc. It was boilerplate angry young man. But why did everything he say make me want to laugh? Some people just have the gift.

Bill's got it. The rubbery face with the pop-out eyes--you know, he is actually handsome when that face sits still--and a real knack for pointing out the hilarity of life's dramas. For years, I have giggled inside every time I think of the story Bill told me (tells everyone) of how his mother burned all his father's clothes on the front lawn every time she caught him cheating. "The neighbors would get used to it. 'Do you smell smoke?' 'Oh, don't worry, Mr. Santiago must have a new secretary.'"

While he pursued his calling, Bill worked as a journalist. I ended up hiring him as a stringer. We became friends too. Thinking back, it makes sense that he would merge two of his passions, comedy and Latin dance, into an act. He has been telling funny stories about his Latin dance exploits for years. Now, instead of a couple of skits in his show, it's the whole show: *The Funny of (Latin) Dance*, premiering in San Francisco.



No doubt he'll do the show in his native tongue, Spanglish, which he immortalizes in a book, *Pardon My Spanglish: One Man's Guide to Speaking the Habla* (Quirk Books, September 2008). I just had to ask: How'd he find the funny in Latin dance?

Evelyn Nieves: You've riffed about Latin dancing in your shows, but what made you want to build an entire show around it?

Bill Santiago: *I started doing a little bit in the shows, and I found that it's not just that there's the physical humor aspect of it; it's a powerful thing for the audience, and people really enjoy it when they see you dancing on stage. It really changes the dynamic. And when you can do it with some authenticity, that makes it that much more memorable. You're always looking to do new things on stage. When you do these little things that can connect with the audience, it's very very powerful.*

What makes it so powerful?

I've asked people in the audience to come up and dance with me, and I never know what's going to happen. So there's a genuine suspense. Especially during a comedy show, where you just don't expect dancing. Whether it's good or bad, it's very, very funny. And it's very in the moment. Plus, at least for me, whenever you are watching dancers, you are dancing along with them, every step, in your mind. Or at least you're compelled to watch. It's no coincidence that it's very popular on TV these days. But I have not seen an entire comedy show where the standup, the comedic monologue of it, is actually integrated with the dance itself.

But what is it about Latin dance in particular that's so special?

With dancing in general, there's a lack of inhibition necessary to do it. And with Latin dance, the lack of inhibition necessary to do it is exponential. That's the first thing. And then with most of the Latin dances, you're dancing with someone, in a couple. Holding each other. Hopefully in some sort of coordinated way. So it's a synchronized lack of inhibition, a synchronized abandon with another human being. The potential just in that for exhilaration and/or total humiliation is also exponential, which for me is an irresistible comedic goldmine. I know what it's like to be in the zone, in total salsa nirvana. And I know what it's like to suck and make a

fool of yourself, and wonder if you'll have your Latino membership card stripped away from you for such a pathetic attempt. Very high stakes and very emotional stuff.

When you say Latin dance, I assume you mean salsa.

But see, I'm interested not just in salsa, but in the spectrum of all Latin dances--salsa, bachata, tango, merengue, cha cha cha, rancheras, corridos, cumbia, reggaeton, flamenco, samba. They are all worlds unto themselves. They attract different people, operate on different frequencies. Most of them, though, have Spanish in common. Except for samba.

And the Spanish language itself operates in a sensually rhythmic way, as opposed to English and German and Russian, say. Have you ever tried dancing to salsa in English? I can't. It doesn't feel right. It throws me. My hips don't move to English salsa. But I do like salsa in French. Why is that? These are all the types of things that I want to get into in this show. It's uncharted territory. The shows coming up in San Francisco are set up to allow me to riff on all these topics as I develop the material. These are all the things that occur to me while I am dancing. So the idea is to integrate the stand-up and the dancing, so that I am basically sharing the thoughts that I have about dancing while I am dancing, but also giving the audience a chance to participate.

You told me you are going to have a professional dancer on hand to do interventions like Dr. Phil when people stumble on their dancing or what have you. So the audience participation sounds crucial to the success of the show.

Totally. The whole thing is a very interactive experience. The audience is part of the show, and I improvise according to whatever they bring to the performance that night. They come up on stage with me, talk to me, dance with me.

We've done it before, when we did this show the first time at La Peña, in Berkeley. We've got live musicians on stage, ready to play whatever music audience members want to dance to. They come up by themselves or as couples, and share their dance stories and dance with me or for me. I actually stop them and ask them what they are doing, how they do it, and to show me, and we riff about anything that has to do with dancing or a particular dance or episode in

their dance experience. Everyone who has ever danced has great dance stories, dance dreams, dance defeats.

Not everyone dances!

But everyone wants to. There isn't a single person that doesn't dance and wouldn't want to be born again as a dancer in the next life. Why is it that watching dancing makes people so happy? Why is that? When you see two people dancing beautifully, who wouldn't want to do that? It gets everyone so excited. There are plenty of shows on TV now that attest to that. But while my show focuses on Latin dance, it's about dance itself--doing it, not being able to do it, and doing it so obsessively and extremely that it loses its original allure and essence for the sake of technique and acrobatics. I'm making fun from every angle, so by the end, everyone wants to get up and dance, regardless of how well or not well they dance themselves.

You seem to have loved Latin dance before you were born.

My parents danced. That's how they courted. They would tell stories about going to these spots in the heyday of New York salsa. At places like El Cabrojeño, Happy Hill Casino, Los Panchos, Los Violines. And on the way back home, they still hadn't had enough. So they would pull over on the West Side Highway, crank up the radio and keep dancing 'til dawn. When I dance, I am trying to capture some of that.

That reminds me: You grew up speaking Spanglish from your parents. Me too. But I never heard it called "The Habla," as you call it. Where did that come from?

The Habla is a phrase someone said to me about speaking Spanish itself, and because it was a Spanglish phrase, spoken to me spontaneously by a non-Latino—gringo--I thought it was beautiful, and a great alternate name for Spanglish, to give me some variety in how I refer to it. You just can't keep writing "Spanglish" a billion times, and I stuck with it for the book. The

original quote came from a guy talking to me, telling me that he did speak some Spanish, and he goes, "Yeah well, I speak the Habla, so I really got the Spanglish jokes in your act."

The Funny of (Latin) Dance plays September 16-20 at Brava Theatre Center. Tickets are \$20-25; call (415) 647-2822. Visit brava.org and myspace.com/billsantiagocomedy.

Evelyn Nieves is a veteran journalist who now writes for the San Francisco bureau of the Associated Press.

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