

REVIEW

Vida! a singular sensation

Vida!

★★★½ (out of 4)

Choreography by Liza Alfonso

Until June 17 at The Royal Alexandra

Theatre, 260 King St. W. 416-872-1212

SUSAN WALKER

DANCE WRITER

Vida! has legs. The Cuban-Canadian production featuring the lithe and limber dancers of Liza Alfonso's *Danza Cuba* is a dance show that works as a musical.

Not only does *Vida!* feature one of the best chorus lines this side of Broadway, but it has a killer band and a singer who is a national treasure, Omara Portuondo.

A tricky conceit — a life told in memories from grandmother to granddaughter — is the storyline that connects the production numbers. Past and present coexist on stage, with the stunning Maysabel Pintado slinking in and out of the crowd, as Death. The story begins in the 1930s, with Vida remembering a birthday party when she was a little girl, and runs through Cuba's tumultuous 20th-century history.

Alfonso's choreography, responding to Cuba's myriad musical styles, happily sustains this epic tale. As an opener, more than a dozen dancers in colourful flamenco dresses dance in a souped-up Spanish classical style as Portuondo sings *Pork eso yo soy cubano*.

Vida remembers how her aunt would berate her servant: and six girls come onstage dressed as Spanish ladies and their maids, clacking in flamenco shoes or flat sandals.

Afro-Cuban and traditional *son*

music intermingle with the changing times and moods of *Vida!*

Ele Valdés, who alternates in the grandmother role, carries a sombre coming-of-age scene singing the African song "Ayabba." The next Vida is Yudisley Martínez, who falls in love with a young man at a street dance. As the only male dancer in the show, Vadim Larramendi has a rooster's role to fill, as he handles Martínez in a sultry pas de deux that is part ballet, part paso doble and part sex.

Grown up and left alone with a child, Vida becomes a teacher. In a scene depicting workers on a commune, Idmaray Benitez leads the jeans-clad chorus line.

They rise on to the tips of their high-heeled flamenco shoes, doing little ballet steps on point — an apt image for the spirit of *Vida!*

“★★★★”
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HILARIOUSLY BLOODY AND BLOO
- R. Ouzounian, The Toronto Star

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