

The Afro-Cuban Gift To American Pop Music

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

New York Times (1923-Current file); Feb 25, 1993; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. C19

Review/Theater

The Afro-Cuban Gift To American Pop Music

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

Too often when American pop history is being discussed, the Afro-Cuban contribution is either ignored or given short shrift. But as "Nostalgia Tropical," an exuberant new revue at Playhouse 91 pointedly demonstrates, it is almost impossible to overstate the influence of the culture that produced the rumba, the cha-

Nostalgia Tropical

Conceived and directed by Max Ferrá; vocal and orchestral arrangements by Meme Solís; choreographer, Victor Cuellar; set by Ricardo Hernandez; lighting by Jennifer Tipton; costumes by Randy Barcelo; sound by Fox & Perla. Presented by Intar and the Light Opera of Manhattan. At Playhouse 91, 316 East 91st Street, Manhattan.

WITH: Hector Miguel Barrera, Merly Bordes, Aimee Cabrera, Claudina Montenegro, Gilberto C. Peralta, Oriando Rios, Marden Ramos, Victor Sterling and Ramoncito Veloz Jr.

cha, the mambo and the conga. These dance rhythms and their echoes and offshoots have been so thoroughly absorbed into contemporary music that they are often taken for granted or referred to by vague catch-all terms like "Latin flavored."

"Nostalgia Tropical," which is a joint presentation of the Intar Hispanic American Arts Center and the Light Opera of Manhattan, is a show with an agenda. Part cultural history lesson, part oldtime Havana floor show, it is a survey course of Afro-Cuban music from the 1920's, 30's, 40's and 50's offered in the guise of a staged nightclub act. The show may have a split personality, but its twin goals of teaching and entertaining mesh comfortably under the direction of Max Ferrá.

Together with Meme Solís, the show's musical director and one of its principal performers, and its choreographer, Victor Cuellar, Mr. Ferrá has created a pageant that is a kind of A-to-Z singing and dancing dictionary of Afro-Cuban genres. They range from danzón, an ornately arpeggiated

Blocked due to copyright.
See full page image or
microfilm.

Carol Rosegg/Mantha Swope Associates
Ramoncito Veloz Jr. and Aimee Cabrera in "Nostalgia Tropical."

piano style in which a European virtuosity is driven by an emphatic 2/4 beat, to "La Guajaira," the original Cuban country music of which "Guantanamera" is the most famous example.

Four singers — Mr. Solís, Ramoncito Veloz Jr., Claudina Montenegro and Aimee Cabrera — perform the songs, many of which have been

strung together in bits and pieces into generic medleys. Two young dancers — Marden Ramos and Merly Bordes — offer flamboyant exhibitions of several ballroom dances, including the mambo, rumba, bolero and cha-cha.

If the musical performances are solidly competent, they are less than scintillating. The middle-aged male leads, in their formal dress, project the debonair hauteur of old-time nightclub entertainers. But neither Mr. Veloz nor Mr. Solís, who sometimes conducts from the piano, has an outstanding voice. Miss Cabrera and Miss Montenegro have strong, earthy deliveries that suit the more rustic material but fail to inject the more floridly romantic numbers with a passionate fire. When the four voices harmonize, they find a rough, very tenuous blend. They are not helped by a sound system that half-buries them in layers of percussion.

The 90-minute extravaganza comes to dazzling life in its sexy dance numbers featuring Mr. Ramos and Miss Bordes. Popping through doors at the rear of the stage every few minutes, attired for each entrance in a different costume, they slither and glide through one acrobatic feat after another. Mr. Cuellar's bold choreography draws dramatically sharp distinctions between the body languages of the various dances.

Eventually "Nostalgia Tropical" turns into a party at which the audience is invited onto the stage to join the performers in a conga line. Given the show's high spirits and the performers' easy conviviality, it is an invitation that many will want to accept.