

## **Danzacuentos: Voz, Cuerpo y Raíces shares**

### **A Conversation between Lyvan Verdecia & Co-Curator David Herrera**

*(This conversation took place over Zoom on August 11, 2021)*

#### **David Herrera:**

Welcome to [Danzacuentos: Voz, Cuerpo y Raíces](#) (*Dance Stories: Voice, Body, and Roots*), an online media series that asks: *What can we learn when we listen to the lived experiences of Latinx, Hispanic, and Indigenous artists?* This series is presented as part of the Bridge Project's Anti-Racism in Dance Series, which offers supportive spaces for Black, Indigenous, People of Color, BIPOC, and white allies to deepen their practices of anti-racism. I'm David Herrera, a choreographer and director of David Herrera Performance Company and Latinx community advocate in San Francisco, California, and one of the three series co-curators. My pronouns are he/him. I am 5'9", toned in frame, brown-skinned, dark, short hair, and brown eyes. I am wearing a white collar dress shirt and light blue jeans. I am sitting in the office at my home.

#### **David Herrera (00:01:01):**

I'm coming to you from the ancestral, unceded lands of the Ramaytush Ohlone people, who are the original peoples of the San Francisco Peninsula. We recognize that we benefit from living and working on their traditional homeland and we affirm their sovereign rights as first peoples. Indigenous communities have lived and worked through this land over hundreds of generations, and Indigenous peoples from many nations make their home in this region today. We recognize and honor their ancestors, descendants, elders, and all members of their communities and give thanks for them, this land, and Mother Earth.

#### **David Herrera (00:01:44):**

So today I am sitting here with Lyvan Verdecia, who I am really excited to have this conversation with. [repeats the previous sentence in Spanish]. Lyvan Verdecia was born in Havana, Cuba. He graduated from the National Ballet School of Cuba in 2013 and joined the National Ballet of Cuba through December 2014, where he developed as a dancer and choreographer. Along with performing and choreographing, Lyvan enjoys sharing the knowledge of his craft by teaching at various companies, schools, and summer programs. Among them are the National Ballet of Cuba, Kingsport Ballet, the New Jersey Dance Theater Ensemble, Art Vida Academy, and the Ballet Hispánico School of Dance. In 2007, Lyvan was awarded the prestigious Princess Grace Award. Currently, Lyvan is in his fourth season with Ballet Hispánico and enjoys the

opportunities given to not only to impact audiences as a performer but as a teacher in workshops around the country as part of the company's outreach initiative. Thank you for being here Lyvan).

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:03:00):**

Thank you for welcoming me.

**David Herrera (00:03:03):**

Can you please let everyone know your pronouns and offer a short visual? (repeats this request in Spanish)

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:03:13):**

My name is Lyvan Verdecia. My pronouns are he/him? I am 5'7". I am wearing a yellow mustard shirt and my background is a white curtain. The color of my skin is brown. (In Spanish: I am 5'7". The color of my skin is mulata, a caramel color. I am wearing a mustard-colored shirt and I am sitting in the living room of my apartment in New York.

**David Herrera (00:04:07):**

Thank you for that. Okay. [In Spanish: I also wanted to give you a moment to let us know how you identify, in all your forms]. How do you self-identify?

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:04:21):**

Yes. I will say, I always remember my father every time he will drop me off at school, he always said, and I'm going to say it in Spanish. [may modesty and simplicity characterize you]. And I describe myself a simple person, modest also, and I think I like comedy. So I always try to fill my life with a lot of humor and I try to always keep myself happy and also people around me. So yes, I think those are the main things, happiness, some simplicity, and modesty. So I always try to keep those words really close to me.

**David Herrera (00:05:28):**

Okay. So you kind of already started answering something that I was instantly going to answer, but I'm going to ask nonetheless and you can give us your thoughts here. So today I really wanted to have a conversation with you about who you are as an artist, as a person, and how this all connects to your heritage. So let's start with you as a person. What do you want to share with the public about who you are as a person that is not written in your biography?

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:06:02):**

Wow. It's a really, really, really good question. Me as a person, yeah. As I was saying, I always try to make my life easier in a way of smiling. I try to always have some humor that really help me go to the next day with more energy, more [enthusiasm]. And I think that's me. In Ballet Hispánico, the company that I work, I always try to be professional, but at the same time, my goal is to be professional and also have fun. If I'm not having fun, it doesn't really get me. So that's me as person. I always try to smile, to be with a good energy, even if I'm a little bit down, or tired, or my body hurts, the smile is the one to really get me on, like turn the lights on inside my body. So I will say, yeah, that's me as a person that is not in my biography.

**David Herrera (00:07:30):**

And outside of the dance that we know that you're a part of, because obviously this is also a dance event, or a dance program, outside of dance, [What are other things you identify with], what else is part of your world? What are the other identities? For instance, I know you're a father, you're a son. So, what else do we not know from just reading your biography?

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:08:03):**

Yeah. Well, now I have a seven months old boy, my son, and he was born the same date that I crossed the border from Canada to United States. He was born on the same day that I got engaged, the same day that I got married, December 20th. And I don't know, that really, really impacted me as a person, and it's, I don't know, so odd. [In Spanish when you say, it is incredible how everything has happened on the same day, and that day has impacted me a lot because it gives me the confidence, the certainty that I am in this world for a purpose, that this day is fundamental for me. That every year]. Every year I'm looking forward to December 20th. Even if I die, that day will be amazing. That is a good, good day to do everything, I don't know. I will go far and say it like this.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:09:29):**

And also, now that I'm a father, I look back, and my dad, Esteban Verdecia, he is still in Cuba, and he is an amazing father. He taught me everything. The way that he taught me how to cook, how to be simple, to be a man, to be a son, a brother to my sister. So now I am thinking of like everything that he had done and everything that he'd do for me, I want to do it for my son. [Every single thing that he has done for me, that he has

taught me, even the way he has taught me, has stayed with me. And in turn, that's what I want for myself, with respect for my son. To teach him also that sometimes in the United States everything tends to be very easy, because we have everything. However, in the country where I come from, it's a third world country, and there are a lot of difficulties. So, to be appreciative of that as well. To be aware that my son still has family in Cuba, that maybe they don't have all the things that we have.]. So, that's me as a person, trying to really go deep and make my son understand that life is worth it, that you need to work, you need to really fight for what you want. So, I don't know if I went out of the path, but....

**David Herrera (00:11:27):**

That's okay. That's what this is about. You get to tell us about you. You don't necessarily have to answer everything specifically. So that was fantastic. That was great.

**David Herrera (00:11:37):**

So I'm going to go back, [I'm going to take a few steps back], because I want the audience to hear a little bit about how and why you got involved in dance, both professional and non-professional.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:11:54):**

Okay. Yes. I think I'm definitely a dancer because of my cousin. My cousin, Miguel Altunaga Verdecia, he's the son of my aunt, my dad's sister. So he's a dancer and a choreographer. Currently living in London, England. And when he was living in Cuba, he was dancing for a company, Danza Contemporanea de Cuba. And I just, since I was born, I grew up really close to him. So I watched him dancing and right away I was like, "That's what I want to do. I want to dance. I want to ..." Every time I saw a choreography, or even I listened to a music, it was just like my ideas were just in my head and thoughts, and I just want to express those ideas through movement.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:13:00):**

So he really pushed me and I want to go to a place where I was able to move, and not even talking, just moving, I will express myself. I'm happy, or I'm sad, or I'm fighting for something through movement. And I think that's why I became a dancer, because of him. So I started ballet school because of him, because I want to do it more contemporary, go to the school that he went, and he encouraged me to do more classical just because la danza classica is like the mother, like the [it prepares you well

physically, the technique of ballet]. And then he told me, "Look, if you start doing more classical, you can jump later to contemporary," and that's what I did.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:14:06):**

I danced for almost 10 years and a half in a school, and then two years in the National Ballet of Cuba. And I had the opportunity to do classical pieces like Swan Lake and Giselle, [Romeo & Juliet, the Nutcracker]. So I think those moments really, really helped me to grow as a dancer. And then professionally in the company that I am right now, Ballet Hispánico, I'm doing more contemporary. So these two compliment really, really, like classical and contemporary really fulfilled my career as a dancer and having it all. And then if I'm going to talk about non-professional dance, it's just in my house, music all the time. All day with music. Dancing salsa. Salsa for me is my favorite style. This morning I was even remembering, my wife when she was pregnant with my son, we made a little salsa dance here in the living room of my apartment.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:15:40):**

And I was thinking, "Wow, I really want right now to recreate that video." Dancing, even wearing the same clothes, or maybe not, but just having my son just watching us dancing, and that's how I grew up, watching my family dancing salsa, rumba, cha-cha-cha, mambo, everything, at home. So that's how my feeling for dance was born, I think. They were born just watching my family and then watching my cousin. So that's why my path went straight to going to the professional dance world.

**David Herrera (00:16:25):**

And now that you're in that professional dance world, [repeats previous in Spanish]. Do you find yourself pulling from your salsa background, from your cultural background, from any ... Does it inform your contemporary or your ballet training, or vice versa? Do you find yourself utilizing every style that you've ever known? I say that because I think sometimes for many of us, we grow up with movement, [in a certain way], and it's in our body. Not important how much training we get or some different form, salsa will probably always live in your body, [right]?

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:17:06):**

Yeah. I agree.

**David Herrera (00:17:08):**

How does that work with you as a professional dancer?

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:17:11):**

I think it's a gift for me that I was able to do classical dance, and also now contemporary, and also growing up doing salsa and rumba and doing everything, because [I can be a versatile dancer]. When you can do it all, you can dance everything, it is a gift. So now I am doing more contemporary. In the morning, I always take a ballet class. Well, at least in Ballet Hispánico, we do a ballet class and then we do contemporary pieces. Well, yes, [Rumba, folklore, it is always in me. Even, in Ballet Hispánico I have the opportunity to dance a lot of different choreographies from a variety of choreographers. And whether they are Spanish, Gypsies, Colombian, Americans, doesn't matter the nationality, it always has a little bit of folklore, there is always a little something beyond the classical. And that's what's great about dance.]. That you can dance. And even if it's one specific style, always the folkloric feel and the folklore, that fire is inside. If you're doing more [Español] and is more flamenco, but the flamenco, the way my body, and also, I'm not tall and I will say that I'm really Latino, my body is muscle. I have muscles, they grew up really fast. So the shape and the position, I will say that I identify myself with a lot of salsa, a lot of rumba, the Afro-Latino is there in me.

**David Herrera (00:19:32):**

Along the same lines of what we were talking about, I want to ask you [How does your art inform your personal life or vice versa? How does your personal life inform your art? With your partner, with your family, with your friends, with your community.]?

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:19:54):**

Yeah. You just said it. First of all, I started dancing with Ballet Hispánico August 2015, and dancing in Ballet Hispánico I met my wife. So this way they are connected from day one. Yes. [Both, my life is totally linked to dance, through music.]. I think like [dance and personal life], movement, I would say, let's say they is just movement, right? [And everyone's personal life, at least mine, music is in the middle. And I love music. And I love to express myself with the body, and dance is born out of it. And I think that even my personal problems are related to dance, in the way that sometimes I find myself playing a role in a dance performance...]. Something specific in a piece and the choreography that I need to be more powerful and maybe I in that moment feeling more happy let's say. Because I just remember that when I just leave Ballet Hispánico I will have some issue with moving or something. At home I try to really take that energy and then transmit it into dance.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:21:37):**

So I think I [I involve everything that can support dance, and try to prevent it from hurting me. So that dance doesn't hurt me in my personal life, and neither do I hurt dance. I try to maintain the positivity.]. And yes, also my best friend there, the one they're living in Miami, Florida, or the one they're here, I think all my friends are dancers, because to be a dancer, you need to, or at least is a good idea to start when you are very young. So to just create, I have so many friends since I was really, really young. [They are all involved]. Maybe they're not dancing anymore, but just have those friends that are really, really, really like family.

**David Herrera (00:22:54):**

Do you think that for yourself, is there a difference between dance and life?

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:23:03):**

I think so. It is hard. It is hard not to, because as I said, I am dancing since I was nine years old. So I would say my entire life almost dancing. But yeah, when I get home, I try to you know ... Like right now, I will say for the last couple of years, I have been struggling a little bit with some injuries. And right now I think for my health, I come home and I like sports, I like baseball, I like soccer, and when I get home, I think it is time for me to like, dance has to sleep a little bit and then just be me, be with my family.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:23:53):**

Even if we listen to music or even if we do some salsa in between cooking, but yeah, I think I'm a good person at separating them. I try to focus in a baseball game, and I don't get bored watching baseball for three or four hours. I go as training. If it's 1:00 AM, like yesterday, at 1:00 AM I was watching a baseball game. So I think there is a difference. And I know you understand if for some people [they can't separate it. They can't separate dance from their life]. I have been working on it and it's happening.

**David Herrera (00:24:44):**

I was also very directly, I guess, referencing dance just as something that is, and not necessarily as a career. Because you just mentioned, that sometimes even though you're relaxing at home, you'll salsa while you're cooking dinner. Then that means dance is part of your daily ritual, it's in your life. But you don't think about that

movement as the same as the professional movement, but it looks like dance is still part of your everyday life.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:25:18):**

Yeah.

**David Herrera (00:25:19):**

Plus, you've mentioned your wife, you met her there, your friends are there. That was why I was wondering like is it the same thing for you, because it all comes together? Or do you try to put those separations? Kind of like you just explained that you do try to put some separation.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:25:36):**

I try to separate them, but as I said, it is hard, because ... I mean, that's what I like. And sometimes I dance professionally and I get paid for dance. And I, I mean [I'll be honest. I dance because I like to dance. I'm very fortunate that through dance, and through what I like to do, I get paid. To be honest with you it's super hard to separate it because I'm put on a little bit of music, I come here, and then I play with my son, and I play him some music....]. And then I try to be funny, and then my son start laughing and that made me so happy. That's the best.

**David Herrera (00:26:38):**

That's very beautiful

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:26:39):**

So I'm trying, I'm working on it, but it is hard.

**David Herrera (00:26:42):**

Now, this is for the audience listening to us. I want to go back yet again. You have a very interesting story about your experience dancing in Cuba and how you ended up dancing in New York City. Tell us about that. What are the differences and commonalities, and what lessons did you learn from each in regard to you as a person and the type of dance you want to participate in? So maybe let's start a little bit, you already gave us a little bit about how you started in Cuba. Do you want to talk a little bit about what that experience was like for you, and then what brought you to New York?

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:27:17):**



Yeah. I would say one good thing Cuba has, Cubans go to the theater and watch dance. That's gold. That's one of the best feeling of dancing in Cuba and have like, I don't know, 10,000 people in a big theater, or like 5,000 people in the big theater, really, really sold out, packed, every weekend. That is crazy. That was crazy. And I grew up dancing when I was in the school. We were able to perform every weekend in a big theater where all the family of the student in the school, they pay to watch us dancing. And David, it is one of the best feelings.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:28:28):**

I started dancing and I went to school and then I saw that ... I remember for my first performance, I was dancing rumba, I remember. [vocalization of rumba rhythm]. And then the whole theater was packed. I was like, "Wow." And that's the best feeling for a dancer, when you see the audience, they're just responding, and that's life. And then when I'm talking about New York, also Ballet Hispánico has like [A lot of fans and followers. And we, the dancers at Ballet Hispánico also have the opportunity to travel] around United States and also around the world. We have been to Serbia, Israel, Latvia. We went to Cuba, Colombia, Germany. So when I'm talking about outside of Cuba, also, I see there is a lot of fans they're dancing. And I will say they're very similar, because they're very culture-loving, a lot of culture-loving people. So they're very, very similar. And I'm so lucky that those two places, Havana, Cuba, or New York here in United States, they love dancing. They love watching and appreciating dance. And what was the other question?

**David Herrera (00:30:19):**

What did you learn from each of them?

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:30:22):**

What did I learn from each of them? In Cuba I think I was a little bit more. I was more reserved. I think I wanted to express myself. Sometime in Cuba it got a little bit difficult because in the company that I was dancing, there were more dancers, more people. And then I was new and so there I have to wait my time. [I had to wait, respect the dancers that had much more time with the company than me. So, I think that when I started dancing here in NY, the company is much smaller, so I learned to communicate more, to express myself more. ]. I learned to say what my feelings were, to really go deep and be free. In Cuba, I had the opportunity to choreograph, to set two pieces, two choreographies for the National Ballet of Cuba. And here I'm able to choreograph

too, I set a piece for one of the companies in Miami, Dimensions, that really allowed me to keep my idea and my work alive.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:32:12):**

So I think both of them [It has taught me a lot. It's taught me...before I was little bit more reserved personally. I was also a little bit younger. But they have both taught me to fight for what I want, for what I think is right, to fight for dance, no? In Cuba I was dancing in a classical company, I was a dancer who liked contemporary, trying to set a neoclassical choreography, a little more contemporary, with a folkloric music, but with the dancers wearing pointe shoes]. So I was a little bit more hesitant, like, "Should I go? Should I do this?" And then when I moved to the United States, I think in New York it just like, "Yes. Why not?". Folkloric music, let's put some pointe shoes. They see what was behind those thoughts or ideas. [I think so, I learned to fight, with both].

**David Herrera (00:33:33):**

When you moved to the United States, what are things that you experienced that people will not think about? Other people who lived here and grew up here wouldn't think about?

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:33:45)**

But not related to dance?

**David Herrera (00:33:47):**

Yes with dance. Culturally, personal, and in dance.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:33:56):**

Yeah. I mean, I would say starting with outside the dance world, I think one of the thing that really impact me, and I'm realizing that a lot of people don't even know, me personally coming from Cuba. A poor country where you're able to get water, like clean water [so potable water, so that you can take a shower, cook, wash dishes, etc.]. One day, every four days. [Four days you didn't have water, you will have water for only one day]. And then I believe [That water is vital for life. I am not going to give much more example. Water for me is for everyone, it is what we drink, what we bathe with, what we used to clean ourselves with. There are many people in the U.S. who have never gone through this. So I feel that, the fact of not having had so many things, but specifically water, and now here in the U.S. water is everywhere. You have water every day, all the time, of course you have to pay for it, but the most logical thing is that you

have, see water 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. And you say wow, not in Cuba, maybe in Cuba I from 365 days I only has access to water 200 of those days. This is just an example of something that people here have never gone through.]. So they don't understand. They don't understand the fact that you don't get to have water every day. So just think. So those are the things that I talk to my friends here in United States and I'm like, "No, in Cuba we don't have water. We have four days without water, one day we have." And, "What?" And I'm like, "Yep." So that's life outside of the dance world.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:36:27):**

And also going to the dance world, I think in Cuba, like I said, people really appreciate a lot dance. And in Cuba, the school and the dance company that I dance to in Cuba, they provide us with ballet shoes and they were not the best one. And every performance I was able to get ballet shoes, let's say. And here, like for example, every month I will get ballet shoes. And here I know those dance wear they're more expensive, so you have to really take care of them. So in Ballet Hispánico, I get to have one pair of shoes for the full season. And I was like, "Wow. Well, you know what? In Cuba, I was able to get one pair of shoes every month." And they're like, "What? Every month? What? Are you eating your ballet shoes?" And I was like, "No."

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:37:47):**

But also, we didn't have linoleum, like the floor. The dance floor in Cuba is just wood. And in here you have linoleum, you have a really good dance floor. So there's so many difference there. When I talk to my friend, I tend to compare them. And then I'm like, "Oh my God, really?" [Every month they would give you a pair of slippers. And I would say yes they give me a pair of slippers, ad here I only get me one. But in Cuba the floor situation was much worse. The situation, at least when I was in Cuba, the situation was very difficult, because of the problem of poverty, the economy I would say. Not here, here usually if you have a business, or a dance company] you have your budget. Those are essential things that really will allow you to be or to have a successful business dancing, and your dancers will, employees will feel comfortable. But in Cuba at the same time, this is what you get. You get a wooden floor and it's really slippery. So, let's dance.

**David Herrera (00:39:27):**

Can you tell us just really briefly how you ended up in Ballet Hispánico?

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:39:35):**

Well, yeah, it is a long story and really-

**David Herrera (00:39:44):**

Okay. Perhaps briefly. Just tell us the story.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:39:47):**

The story, yeah. I mean, I met Ballet Hispánico in Cuba, 2014. I was dancing with the National Ballet of Cuba in one of the ballet festivals in Havana. Ballet Hispánico was invited to Cuba for the first time. And I was, before this festival, the months prior to that, I was working with a choreographer, she's half Belgian, half Colombian, Annabelle Lopez Ochoa. So I was working with her in a piece and when the festival started, I was getting ready for a performance. And one of my best friends in Cuba, he does the sound technician for the Ballet Nacional. So he was working specifically with Ballet Hispánico in a theater. And he called me and was like, "Lyvan, you need to come here. You need to see this company, Ballet Hispánico. Oh my God, they're amazing."

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:40:51):**

So I went and I watched one of the rehearsals, and oh my God, they were playing a full repertory of Celia Cruz. [The diva of Cuban music]. And they were dancing with all the Celia Cruz songs, and I was like, "What? This is incredible." A company in the United States, in New York, they're dancing with my Cuban music. So that was really touching, and all the repertory, all the choreography they brought to Cuba were amazing. And one of them were Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, so the same choreographer that I was working. She told me [about them], and then all those connections made me just fall in love with the company.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:41:46):**

It was funny because I went to the performance and I was trying to get in touch with the director, Eduardo Vilaro, and I just wanted to introduce myself. And I'm like, "I love your company. I would love to dance for you guys." And he said, "Okay. Well, you should come to New York." And I mean, being in Cuba, living in Cuba, it is really hard to travel. So I was able to, later on in December, this was November, in December, I was able to go on tour doing Nutcracker to Canada with the National Ballet of Cuba. And that's when I decided not to come back to Cuba and pursue my path to Ballet Hispánico, because that is how we say in Cuba "la tapa al pomo". That was the cap. That was one of the things I was like, "Wow. Lyvan, I really want to dance outside of

Cuba." That made me leave my family, leave my friends in Cuba to pursue my career as a dancer in another country. So yeah, I went to Canada. I traveled to Canada doing Nutcracker with the National Ballet and did not return to Cuba. I crossed the border on December 20, 2014.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:43:16):**

And I went straight to Miami to be able, because I have some family friends, I was able to make all my paperworks and then [And I every day, every month I wrote to the director. I would say, hi I'm here in Miami. My intentions are still to dance for the company]. And he was always really kind and responding, but I mean, I had to go to New York. I need to like take an audition for the company. But this is so [Fortunately for me three male dancers left. So they were in need of male dancers at that time. So by way of the connection with Anabelle Lopez Ochoa, the choreographer, the director of Ballet Hispánico, who had worked a lot with this choreographer, asked her what she thought of me... since I was so, so (David: eager)]. Yes, hungry. [To dance for Ballet Hispánico. So he asked her what she thought of me and if she would recommend Lyvan? And she said yes. She gave him a very good review of me. And that's how I was able to get into Ballet Hispánico without auditioning. I am one of the few dancers in the history of Ballet Hispánico, that got in without auditioning]. My first day I started dancing, Eduardo Vilaro, they didn't know anything about me dance-wise. So I had two or three months contract, just like [a trial], and he had to see me dancing. And I took that chance and I put it in my pocket. I was like, "Whoop, stay with me." So yeah, [To this day I am a dancer of Ballet Hispánico. And that is the entire trajectory from 2014 until now.].

**David Herrera (00:45:29):**

That's a very cool story. I mean, it just shows how community can work to support you, because Annabelle Ochoa, who I've had the pleasure of meeting via online actually, and she's a lovely person, she had worked with you in Cuba. And then she, , she is now with Ballet Hispánico separately. And then here you are now trying to chase Ballet Hispánico and it was because Annabelle also put in a good recommendation for you that they were like, "All right. Come up."

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:46:05):**

Yeah, like that. Exactly like that.

**David Herrera (00:46:09):**

That's really cool to see that this community can also work on a global scale like this, and it worked out for you.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:46:18):**

Yeah. I mean, I would say the world is so big, but at the same time, it's so small. There is Cubans in every single country, I will say. And maybe I'm being a liar right now, but I would say that there's a lot of Cuban everywhere. Everywhere. I will go to Alemania, Germany, and like this Cuban in Tromsø, Norway. I went to dance in Tromsø, Norway, a few miles from the super north, really it is dark and cold, and oh my God, there was a Cuban over there. I was like, "Whoa. Oh my God." I was able to perform in Tromsø, one of the festival in Tromsø, Norway, and there were like five Cuban and they were like, "Wow, there's a Cuban in Ballet Hispánico?" We go in and I met them and then, oh my God, just incredible, incredible how the community is-

**David Herrera (00:47:19):**

Yeah. I was going to say I think that's very intrinsic in our comunidades Latinas, Latinx community, that we-

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:47:27):**

Support each other.

**David Herrera (00:47:28):**

... support each other. We try to find each other and we try to uplift each other.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:47:32):**

Yep. That's correct. Oh my God.

**David Herrera (00:47:36):**

You've been with Ballet Hispánico for how long now?

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:47:42):**

So this week I started my 7th season.

**David Herrera (00:47:45):**

Oh my gosh. Your 7th season. Okay. Wow. I had my notes wrong then. I had less. So seven seasons?

**Lyvan Verdecia** (00:47:54):

Seven seasons.

**David Herrera** (00:47:55):

Okay. That's a lifetime.

**Lyvan Verdecia** (00:47:56):

Yeah.

**David Herrera** (00:47:58):

[A full life]. I noticed that in one of your video samples, you actually, that you provided, in this video sample, it was kind of like a video just about you and about what dance does for you, what dance means for you. So in one of the samples, which is the profile you say "artists can use a simple gesture, like a smile, to cure pain and ease suffering and transform minds." [Can you give us a little more of your thoughts on this in relation to being Cuban, Latinx, an immigrant, and more recently a dual citizen?].

**Lyvan Verdecia** (00:48:41):

Yes, that's right. I mean, like I said it in the beginning, smiling for me is number one, happiness and [What I meant with this is, the way in which I experienced dance, is the way in which I want to give/share dance, no? I was a spectator when I was little. Visually, I saw the dance and everything that moves within it]. And you see from outside and you see dance and you're like, "Wow, there's so many things that you are so curious." And I see like the happiness and the sadness, and then fighting for something, so many things that you can do dancing, and that's what I felt when I was younger. I felt like that you can transmit, you can heal, you can [Healing wounds, healing mental wounds. When a person is in a very dark mental situation, dance can help.].

**Lyvan Verdecia** (00:50:14):

I had the pleasure of dancing for people in jail. And I met, there were Cuban, there were Puerto Rican, there were so many Latinos, then I was dancing for them. And then they really appreciate and then they were like, "Wow, this is the first time that I'm sitting watching dance." And honestly, they had one of the best days during their time in jail. And I can really say, honestly, I saw every single reaction, every single feeling coming from their heart. So that's what I meant. [What I meant by this text. For me personally, dance can do everything with only a gesture]. I was dancing in that moment and I did

something, maybe something more Cuban, or maybe something like with the shoulder, and those people were connecting with those movements. Maybe not with me, but just with the movement, they were like, "Wow." They just remind me when I was a kid watching my abuelo dancing rumba in the house. [Dance is everything].

**David Herrera (00:51:55):**

So, I'm going to ask you something in the same thread, but a little bit more personal. Has dance healed anything for you? And you can share, or would like to share, you don't have to.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:52:11):**

Well, heal everything for me, I would say. Yeah. I mean, unfortunately, I have some moments where ... Like when I was in Cuba, [I suffered a bit of racism I can say. I wasn't chosen to dance because I was black, because I am a short person. Because I don't have maybe the best feet, the best physique. And that's how they would say it to me. No because you are black, because you are short.]. You cannot dance because you're black. So I felt so [horrible inside]. Anger was really taking part of my whole body. And I start choreographing. I start transmitting all those feelings inside me and putting it into dance. And also I'm trying to get more into this recompilation of this year during my time. Like coming from Cuba to the United States, all those changes. And I want to do a big piece and I don't want to say anything because of no conflict. But yeah, something is coming where I'm going to be able to express myself, because maybe in Cuba I couldn't maybe in Cuba I was just choreographing for me, making some movement where I can't really, my body will say it all. And maybe I was not able to because if I say something I will get fired or I won't be able to even do the parts I was able to do being a black dancer.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:54:27):**

So, yeah, I think [Yes, see, dance healed. Yes, dance has healed. Because it has allowed me even while I don't speak, while I stay quiet, to still speak, to still express myself]. I'm able to express myself through movement, and maybe sometimes it's not a good time for me to express with words, because I know that I will get in trouble for that. Really, I mean, everything is interpretation. You can interpret my movement, whatever you think. But my movement, what I have inside, is why it's more important. So, yeah, I agree.

**David Herrera (00:55:17):**



So, listen, I'm going to move forward with ideas here. As mentioned, How do you envision your future in dance after ... Well, you've been with Ballet Hispanico for seven years, but if you're imagining the future, what does that look like with dance and with your own personal life?

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:55:38):**

Yeah. And they're very different because in the end, I would love to choreograph. I would love to travel and then be able to meet all the companies and then work with them. More classical, more contemporary, more folkloric. I love choreographing. That's one of the things that really make me happy. And that's the perfect future for me after I'm done dancing. I want to choreograph. I want to express myself. I want to keep my dancing alive through movement with other bodies. And I think that's really challenging because when I choreograph, I always envision myself doing it. Well, it is also good to see my ideas, my movement in another body, other people doing it. So, I think that's one really good reason to keep dancing.

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:56:59):**

And outside of dancing, I want to build. I like painting houses. I like building things with wood. Now I have a garage where I'm planning and designing it, and being a garage for my car, but also being a workshop. And I don't know, maybe it's because 2020 really taught me to go outside of my comfort zone. And I started doing some photography, but I really enjoy and I have fun photographing everything. Mostly people on the street or dancing. So I see myself in the future outside of dancing just having my garage, having my photo studio, or also building, I don't know, a cabinet, or painting a house. I think I'm [I am very curious. I'm very curious because I like to get out of my comfort zone. I watch a lot of "do-it-yourself" DIY videos, and I always say to myself if other people do it, why can't I? I can do it.] And I like flipping houses, getting the house really, really in a poor situation and then just making some beautiful homes. So that's me outside of dancing.

**David Herrera (00:58:55):**

Yeah. So speaking about homes, I noticed that you recently bought your first house with your family. First of all, congratulations. How do you feel, and what does this mean for you and your family?

**Lyvan Verdecia (00:59:10):**

It means everything. It's like [the American dream], we call it in Cuba, and also I think here too. [the American dream] for me being a Cuban born in Cuba coming to United States and having my family really close to me all the time. I'm very close to family. And now having a house, having a home, I think I want to [I'm one of those people who think that instead of paying rent, I'd rather pay for my house, right? That way I can make the decisions, paint the house the color I want. Just the fact that it's mine, it's enough, it's a lot. It is a dream that I have had since I arrived in the United States to be able to live, to be able to have a house for myself, my wife, and my son]. I think and I believe that the day that I die, I want to leave something to my family, to my son, the day that I have daughters, give them the house, I don't know. [To leave something. That house where we live. That home. There are many houses. But a home is what you create, the energy you create, the love inside. Also, I have lived in a lot of apartments].

**Lyvan Verdecia (01:01:05):**

I have lived for seven years in an apartments. So it's more apartments where you are not able to do what I love, and I would love to ... I said, "I want to have a garage." And in New York you cannot because you are in a building. Well, now I do have a garage. So now I'm going to be able to do more things. And yeah, that's what I think for me is just [A home where I can continue to create]. I mean, I don't know for me.

**David Herrera (01:01:54):**

Well, that's great. You said it in Spanish, but I'm going to quickly translate that. What you were saying was that buying your first house, to you, is not just buying the house, not just the structure, but what you get to build inside of it. And I don't mean building what you were just talking about, like cabinets. I mean, building the family, building the community, building love through the family, and then being able to pass those values to your children and sharing that with other people. That's really a beautiful sentiment.

**Lyvan Verdecia (01:02:22):**

Yeah. And I think also, I'm in New York, right? And the house that me and my family just bought is in Miami, Florida. And why in Florida? Because in Florida, I have lots of friends, lots of family, my wife family, they live in Florida. And I think also Florida, I'm going to be able to [raise my child in a better way] in a better way. And also because, I don't know, it's warm, it's close to my Cuban culture. So I think I'm going to be working towards good things and those good things are definitely related to my family.

**David Herrera (01:02:23):**

Wow. So that's a change then, New York to Miami.

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:03:28):

Yes.

**David Herrera** (01:03:31):

It's exciting too though. It sounds like you're very happy with this idea.

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:03:34):

Right. I am. Absolutely.

**David Herrera** (01:03:37):

Now, before we move towards closing here, I'm going to ask you some simpler questions. First I want to ask, when you started with Ballet Hispanico, you said you met your wife there?

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:03:53):

Yes.

**David Herrera** (01:03:55):

I was curious too, like did you immediately connect or were you ... What's it like watching your wife dance, because that's how you saw her, right?

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:04:05):

Yeah.

**David Herrera** (01:04:06):

That's how you met her.

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:04:07):

I met her dancing, and it was funny because I didn't speak any English. So she was there helping me translating. And I was like [what did they say, I didn't understand]. And then she was like ... And of course, more friends were helping me, but she was there. And then also, I don't know, the way that she works, she's really intense. I remember her doing pushups and doing abdominals and having six packs like, "Whoa." And she just passed in front of me and she's laughing, she's listening too. She's a hard worker and that really helped me to work hard and to work smart, in a

smart way. She helped me to understand how things go here in the United States. They're different than Cuba.

**Lyvan Verdecia (01:05:25):**

And just, I don't know, I saw her enjoying dancing and I really enjoy dancing too. So we have so many things in common. Like her family, they were born in Cuba, so they're Cuban. So she's a Cuban American. And I was like, "Wow." So we are really, really, really connected. So at some point I never danced with her. I danced with her in a group, but never partnering with her for the physical. I was dancing with another female dancer, another girl. Well, at some point, very randomly for an interview, the director, or the artistic director, CEO, Eduardo Vilaro, he put us together for an interview. And then my costume, it was different color than the hers. So I was doing a different track. I never danced with her before.

**Lyvan Verdecia (01:06:27):**

So he was like, "Hey, Lyvan and Melissa, you're doing this interview with me for Univision." So we go in and then I was like, "Oh my God." So I had to learn something like the piece they're different, and I don't know, the way that she just took that and, "Sure. Sure. Different track, doesn't matter. Let's do it, let's work." And I don't know, it was so fun to dance with her, to feel her, to feel her energy. Her energy is 1000% all the time. And I'm a little more reserved. Sometimes I give it all and then I go because she's on it every, every single. So that helped me a lot.

**Lyvan Verdecia (01:07:13):**

And since then, I think the [chemistry was there] and then I think Eduardo saw that and put us together. And since then, that's it. In Cuba we say "el roce hace el cariño", like when you are skin to skin it really just becomes something special in a good way saying. So, yeah. So since very beginning, since 2015, we have been together, we got engaged in 2017, we got married in Miami 2018, and since then ... Yeah.

**David Herrera (01:08:00):**

And now you have your baby.

**Lyvan Verdecia (01:08:01):**

We have a baby.

**David Herrera** (01:08:05):

Amazing. Wow. So I mean, dance has really given you a lot more than just dance.

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:08:11):

A lot more, correct.

**David Herrera** (01:08:13):

That's exciting. Oh my gosh. Beautiful, beautiful story. I mean, tell your wife, Melissa, that I'm sorry. I hope she is not embarrassed that I asked this question.

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:08:20):

No, no, no. I'm not.

**David Herrera** (01:08:25):

Okay. Who are your idols? Actually, let me go back. Who's your favorite singer?

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:08:31):

Singer?

**David Herrera** (01:08:35):

And you could just shoot the first person you-

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:08:38):

Yeah. In English, I listen to a lot of Usher. In Spanish I like Marc Anthony.

**David Herrera** (01:08:48):

Okay. Yes. And your favorite actor or actress?

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:08:52):

I would say Denzel Washington. Yep, definitely.

**David Herrera** (01:08:58):

Do you have a favorite writer?

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:09:03):

You know, there's a Cuban writer, and also he's an actor. The name is Alexis Valdés. He writes a lot of novelas for theater. He has his books. I like Alexis Valdés a lot. And

also there's a comedian, Trevor Noah, that I just read his book, and it's amazing. It's really good.

**David Herrera** (01:09:39):

Yes. Your favorite food.

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:09:42):

I will say [Bistec de Palomilla, con congri y platano maduro frito]. I don't know. I like a lot meat. I love meat. I will eat meat every day. My wife says, "No, that's not healthy." So nowadays I changed like fish and chicken, different. But yeah, if I'm eating pasta, it has to be bolognese. That meat has to be there. I don't know. Well, I do love palomilla, I like a steak, really thin. You can cut it even with super, super simple and easy to cut and easy to digest. So I don't know. And congri and platanito, that has to be there-

**David Herrera** (01:10:51):

Who cooks more at home? You or Melissa?

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:10:53):

No, me. Definitely. No me and Melissa, no. Me. She hates cooking. She hates cooking. But she's an amazing baker. She bakes really ... She makes cake, she makes everything. And in the morning, she's the one in charge of breakfast. And she almost every day I have the pleasure of eating waffle with strawberry, which is amazing. So she's in charge in the kitchen, she's in charge in the mornings. And after that, that's all me.

**David Herrera** (01:11:33):

What has been your favorite place so far to visit? I know you have many places you've visited, but what has been your favorite?

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:11:42):

I would say Spain, and Italy, and Rome. I went to Rome. There's a lot of culture, there's a lot of love there. And Spain, it's just a beautiful country. And maybe it's because it's my first language. And in Spain, it's just ... I don't know. Then I went to Barcelona, I went to Madrid, and I have so much fun. Spanish people they're so loving and saw the energy always there, like intense. So I really love that. So I think I have been in a lot of places. But Spain and Italy, they're the one.

**David Herrera** (01:12:31):

And lastly. Who are your idols in dance and in life?

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:12:50):

In dance is Carlos Acosta. He is a black dancer and what he has done is just incredible. I had the pleasure of dancing with him when I was 12. I had the opportunity to be part of his creation, Tocatoro, a Cuban tale, and it's about his life. So I was the young Carlos Acosta. So that was really, really a huge opportunity. That my first trip. That was my first time going outside of Cuba. I performed with him in London, England, and also I went to Turkey. So it was to the festival in Turkey, and I was 12 years old.

**David Herrera** (01:13:41):

And who's your idol in life?

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:13:44):

My father and my mother, they're one. And I'm going to say my mother and my father, they gave me my life. So of course, they're the one. Now I have a wife, I have a son. So my feelings they're being shared. But for sure, my mom and my dad, my dad specifically, he has been a model for me. [The perfect model, and we all have flaws. We all have our flaws. He has taught me everything. He has taught me to be brave. My mom is a little more reserved. I think I have half and half. I am very similar physically to my mother in the face, but in the body to my father. But internally] it's 50/50 on my mother and my dad. Yeah. I will say they're both, my mother and my dad, they're my idols.

**David Herrera** (01:14:57):

Wow. That's so great. I love your sense of family and heritage and everything you've just been sharing. So Lyvan, I want to thank you for being so generous with your story and for your time today. If people want to connect with you and support your work, where can they reach you?

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:15:20):

Well, social media. I have Instagram, Lyvan Esteban, L-Y-V, as in Victor, A-N. Esteban is my second name, E-S-T-E-B, as in boy, A-N. Yes. Verdecia is my last name. Verdecia, V-E-R-D-E-C-I-A. And Marrero is my second last name, because I'm from Cuba, M-A-R-R-E-R-O. So Lyvan Esteban Verdecia Marrero in Facebook, or in Instagram it's

just Lyvan Verdecia, my first name and my last name. So yeah, social media, I'm there. Or you can Google me. I think a lot of people randomly they Google me, Lyvan Verdecia, and there's a lot of videos I don't know, videos or-

**David Herrera (01:16:25):**

And they find you, yes.

**Lyvan Verdecia (01:16:27):**

Yeah, they can find me also.

**David Herrera (01:16:28):**

You are also welcome, if you have a Venmo, if you're starting projects, feel free to say that.

**Lyvan Verdecia (01:16:33):**

Oh my God. Yes. I think Venmo ... I need to check it. I never share my Venmo.

**David Herrera (01:16:41):**

You don't have to. I was just saying if you're starting projects and people are feeling generous, but you don't have to. Well, we can put some of these things also under ... When the podcast goes out, we can put some of this information too.

**Lyvan Verdecia (01:17:00):**

Yes, I think that's better.

**David Herrera (01:17:03):**

Thank you for being here and for being so generous with your story. I also want to thank the listeners for joining us today. I want to give a shout out to my fellow Danzacuentos co-curators, Karla Quintero and Mario Ismael Espinoza. Funding for the Bridge Project's Anti-Racism in Dance comes from the Duke Charitable Foundation. The Bridge Project is co-directed by Karla Quintero, Cherie Hill, and Hope Mohr. To learn more about the Danzacuentos series, visit [danzacuentos.org](http://danzacuentos.org). And that is spelled D-A-N-Z-A-C-U-E-N-T-O-S, to get further information.

**David Herrera (01:17:47):**

I also want to let you know that there's multiple other artists being profiled in this event, five other artists, in fact, I believe. And so I want to make sure that you know that



there's other folks who are going to be sharing some of their personal stories and their ideas and everything. Kind of like we just did it here with Lyvan. Lyvan, before we go, is there anything else you'd like to share with the listening audience?

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:18:15):

Just be happy. Be happy. Enjoy every single second of your life. Life is short and you need to really enjoy that. So, that was it.

**David Herrera** (01:18:31):

All right. Lyvan, so thank you so much for those words. So with this, we're going to say goodbye and we are excited and we'd love to hear from you. If you have any notes after you hear this interview, let us know what you think and hopefully we can all connect. All right, have a great day, night, whatever the case may be, listeners, and thank you so much for joining us. Bye-bye.

**Lyvan Verdecia** (01:18:56):

Thank you.