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Things are coming up rosy for Rosie

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JARED LAZARUS / DUKE PHOTOGRAPHY

Miami choreographer Rosie Herrera after rehearsal for an American Dance Festival performance at Duke University's Baldwin Auditorium on June 23, 2009.

This party keeps starting out sweet and fun, then going terribly wrong. The dancers showing off their sexiest voguing moves break down and weep. Their suave rendition of the electric slide becomes hysterical stomp. A guest enters suddenly and starts whacking a piñata with a bright pink, foam-covered baseball bat, the sort a 5-year-old suburban princess might favor -- except this woman terrifies others by beating the floor in uncontrollable rage.

In the background, Lesley Gore sings "It's my party, and I'll cry if I want to." The contrast between maudlin and mayhem is often funny -- even when the 10 performers in this Wynwood rehearsal studio seem overcome by feelings they can't control. In choreographer Rosie Herrera's *Pity Party*, emotional extremes go by so fast they blur.

"I think parties and funerals are very similar," says the petite, 27-year-old Herrera, watching her dance-theater piece attentively through bright turquoise-framed glasses. "Both of them have a lot of people there for the same purpose, and at both of them people are trying to make connections."

When *Pity Party* premieres Monday at the American Dance Festival in Durham, N.C., the occasion could also be cause for celebration or despondency. The 76-year-old festival of performances and workshops is one of the country's most significant and historic dance events and has fostered modern-dance choreographers from Martha Graham to Twyla Tharp. The Chinese dance artist Shen Wei, who started his company at ADF 10 years ago, became world famous for choreographing the opening ceremonies for the Beijing Olympics.

Although she was at ADF last summer to stage her first substantial dance-theater piece, *Various Stages of Drowning: A Cabaret*, with festival dance students, Herrera knows that this week's performances are a big step up. Festival director Charles Reinhart commissioned *Pity Party* and will present it, along with *Drowning*, in three evenings of Herrera's work -- an extraordinary level of visibility and support for a young, largely untried choreographer unknown outside Miami.

But Reinhart, who fell in love with *Drowning* at Miami Light Project's Here and Now showcase at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts in early 2009, thinks Herrera deserves a chance. When Reinhart watches *Drowning*, "the hair goes up on the back of the neck," he says from his home in Durham. "Is this one of the great ones? Someone who has real talent? Or is it just something they did, and that could be it?"

An influential dance world figure for 55 years, Reinhart is gambling that Herrera, despite her youth and inexperience, can create another hair-raiser.

"I'm taking a chance, because she doesn't just show talent, but really developed talent, the sophistication to be able to make you laugh and cry in the same breath," he says. "So here we go. I'm crossing my fingers. If I was a gambler -- which I am in my world -- I'd put my money on Rosie."

HAPPY SHOWGIRL

That's enough pressure to perturb even the usually imperturbable Herrera. Last summer, Reinhart greeted a beaming Herrera at a festival performance. "You know what I like about this girl?" he asked a bystander. "She's always so happy."

"That's the showgirl in me," Herrera said. "We hide the pain behind a smile."

However, the smile looks a little strained in the days before Herrera and her fledgling company are slated to arrive at the festival. "I am nervous as s - - -," she sighs. But she is determined to focus not on the risk she's taking but on the chance she's got.

"I just have to accept that commissions are for artists to grow and create work, not to create a masterpiece every time."

Herrera, who grew up in Hialeah, has found confidence and determination in the unconventional path she has taken to become a modern-dance choreographer. She has been a feather-tailed Little Havana cabaret performer, a booty-bouncing hip-hop dancer and a creator of competitive drag-queen extravaganzas. Now those uninhibited styles help the New World School of the Arts B.F.A. graduate find unexpected routes to profound feelings. "There's a lot of playfulness in my work," she says. "I think that if you can connect to that part of you where there's innocence and joy and playfulness, that part is also the deepest part of you."

In a way, *Pity Party* is Herrera's effort to find something positive in the devastating events of the past year: the Haiti earthquake, the economic crash, the oil spill. She started by working

on a different idea, but reality intruded. "We were in the pity-party mind frame," she says. "We're all grieving for something, it seems. There's so much grieving -- for the loss of the status quo, the loss of nature as we know it. Thousands of people died in Haiti, and we're all grieving all over the world."

Herrera is not the type to wallow, however. "You have to allow yourself five minutes of self-pity," she says. "Then you move on." Like its title, *Pity Party* often mocks emotional indulgence, whether festive or gloomy. Herrera's history in cabaret and clubs has made her fluent in camp. When the extravagantly long-limbed Luis Cuevas leads the satin-gloved dancers in a voguing session, the result is fabulous and ridiculous. The soundtrack is laden with pop-culture sentiment: Earth, Wind, and Fire's slinky disco classic *Brazilian Rhythm*; Chavela Vargas' heart-ripping rendition of the bolero *Piensa en mi*.

"I wanted music that invoked a sense of nostalgia," Herrera says. "Because nostalgia is deeply connected to grieving. They're both connected to feelings about the past."

ARSHT SUPPORT

Herrera's unabashed theatricality is a characteristic that has endeared her to Scott Schiller, executive vice president of the Arsht Center, which co-commissioned *Pity Party* and will present Herrera's company early next year. The Arsht has also helped Herrera with administration and fund-raising, letting her apply for grants through its auspices, arranging travel and housing at ADF and introducing her to donors. The help has been a boon to Herrera, who was overwhelmed by managing her new company, raising money, creating work and supporting herself as a freelance cabaret dancer and choreographer.

"Rosie is the type of artist our institution is trying to nurture," Schiller says. "She can go from very campy to very serious and back, and because she's got the audience in the palm of her hand, the audience goes on that journey with her and arrives in the right place at the right time."

If Herrera, with her geographically particular sensibility and poly-cultural clan of performers, can make a mark in the dance world, that success would be an achievement for her community as well as for her career. But she is too busy shaping the magnificent, ridiculous pain she's putting onstage to worry about the future. Plus, she has to come up with a name for her company, now that she has one.

"I've been stressed out about a name for weeks," she says. "It has to be bilingual, and it has to make sense. But I'm a perfectionist, and I haven't figured it out yet."