

# Review Ruben Blades, Gustavo Dudamel can't quite connect with Bowl

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Gustavo Dudamel conducts the L.A. Phil with salsa star Ruben Blades at the Hollywood Bowl. (Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times)

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**T**wo years ago, on a warm July evening in Caracas, Gustavo Dudamel and his Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra were joined by Panamanian salsa star Rubén Blades for a huge outdoor concert. Bringing together for the first time two Latin American musical icons, the event reportedly generated enough electricity to light the Venezuelan capital and drew an

audience in excess of 200,000.

More than that, a cast of actors, singers and an orchestra of 140 provided the first revival in 30 years of Blades' ambitious and absurdly neglected 1980 salsa opera, "Maestra Vida."

Tuesday night, as part of the Americas & Americans Festival at the Hollywood Bowl, Dudamel invited Blades to join him and the Los Angeles Philharmonic for a set of numbers that included excerpts from "Maestra Vida." A little, however, got lost in the translation, or would have, had there been a translation.

The evening was a strange one. It began with a warm-up first half of two short orchestral works — Arturo Márquez's *Danzón No. 4* and Emilio Kauderer's "Symphonic Tangos."

For his hourlong set after intermission, Blades was joined by both the L.A. Phil and his own six-member, all-male band of percussionists, bassist and backup singers.

The relatively sedate audience couldn't hold a candle to the Caracas crowd. The Bowl was half-full, attracting 8,888, which is not much greater than the number of listeners Dudamel and the L.A. Phil might draw on a typical Tuesday night of classical repertory.

And while there was a little lively dancing in the aisles (encouraged by both Dudamel and Blades), there were also picnickers squeezing past them to make an early exit. Without translations on the video screens for Blades' Spanish songs, too many clearly felt left out.

All of this was a shame, because Blades is a remarkable figure, and a full production of "Maestra Vida" ("Life as Teacher") — or even a concert performance like Dudamel's memorable "Cavalleria Rusticana" and "Pagliacci" Sunday night at the Bowl — could have proved revelatory. Then again, try as the L.A. Phil might — and there were hot brass solos — this is not really full L.A. Phil material.

Even Blades seemed a little out of his element this time. A lawyer, outspoken politician and, most of all, poet, he seems to have developed his engaging musical style as a vehicle for lyrics, not the other way around. At 66, his voice has become dry but is still serviceable. But he didn't quite know how to connect with the kind of mixed crowd, with the majority having "not yet" (as he put it in his brief English comments from the stage) learned Spanish.

In two parts, "Maestra Vida" explores the lives and relationships early in life and late, in the "alley of bored people," delving into the changing personal and political responsibilities. Justice and injustice have been themes in all forms that his career has taken.

"Maestra Vida" also expands the idea of salsa to include other Latin musical forms. A collaboration with trombonist Willie Colón, the opera was also full of instrumental experiments as well as formal

and theatrical and poetic ones, including the first time Blades worked with strings.

Well ahead of its time, "Maestra Vida" was not a success. The two-LP set sold poorly and went out of print. It can lately be found, with some looking, on CD. Blades told the crowd Sunday he didn't know what to call the work, saying it wasn't an opera but maybe a musical. It's an opera.

In "Manuela" (expressing the world's most beautiful woman "in whom youth pulsates") and "El Nacimiento de Ramiro" (a celebration of the wonders of the birth of Manuela's son) and, especially in "Maestra Vida" (an astonishing song looking back at life written by a 30-year-old), Blades brought a kind of remote but moving wistfulness to songs of his youth that now suggest a precocious maturity. He also offered a handful of his more popular numbers, including "Plastico" (his 1978 ode to plastic people) and "Pedro Navaja" (his take on "Mack the Knife").

But there wasn't any real sense of connection, beyond obvious mutual respect, with Dudamel or the L.A. Phil. Something, and I'm not sure what, was lacking. The Bolívars would do well to put their no doubt amazing "Maestra Vida" concert out on video.

Dudamel introduced the evening by saying that he wanted to include a thousand pieces, likening the process to packing for a trip and wanting to take everything with you. But when the suitcase won't close, you have to take things out.

This time, he packed too quickly. He kept Marquez's Danzón No. 4, a slyly ingratiating score, but couldn't fit in the Mexican composer's intriguing Ravelian Danzón No. 8 and took it out of the program. Instead, Dudamel kept the four featherweight tangos by Kauderer, who is best known as a film composer. They made the suitcase lighter, but that was about all.

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