

Rebelliousness and Self-Esteem through Dance

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Havana went all out for its 23rd International Ballet Festival in 2012, wanting to deck itself out to celebrate a number of centennials: Virgilio Piñera (1912-79), Igor Youstkevitch (1912-94) [one of Alicia Alonso's relatives], painters Rita Longa (1912-2000), René Portocarrero (1912-85) and Mariano Rodríguez (1912-90), as well as the debut of *La Comparsa* (1912), one of Cuba's most celebrated musical pieces, composed by Ernesto Lecuona.

Havana always calls us to feel passion; we are all equally welcome in its celebration. Similarly, these days also allow us to exercise our memories. Dance in Cuba, although not enjoyed by everyone, has never ceased being a poetics of gesture, a feast of the spirit, and a real discursive space in which gestures, movement and words are the unrepeatable geometry of bodies.

Alicia Alonso is not the only gift that the ballet company brothers Fernando and Alberto Alonso gave to Cuba. They were its principle architects and contributed to weaving the true union and seam of Cubanness—with threads reflecting only one aesthetic.

Known at the height of his career as the prince of Cuban dance, Fernando Alonso has won the National Dance Prize (2000) and the Benois Prize (2008), the latter of which is like an Oscar for dancing. For him, the

Cuban School of Ballet is a response to insularity: Cuba is a country that does not resign itself to its borders. His pedagogical work has been decisive, just as Alberto Alonso's was (1917-2007). The latter of these two men positioned classical dance in a privileged place that established and promoted a neo-classical Cubanness. These men were the core of a moving aesthetic; they brought to it spirit, and inspired rigor and plenitude. Very early on, they realized that Cuba was an island where sensations could be danced. By exercising rigor and passion, they lifted the entire island.

The Cuban School of Ballet is a way to feel with a Cuban accent; it represents a game of grace and sensitivity. It is not seeing its best times right now, but as an artistic movement, it is in the vanguard, and must overcome many challenges. One of them is to achieve a unity of style within diversity. Its *mélange* of races must allow for our identity to be steadfast, bulletproof.

Along with Fernando and Alberto Alonso, a number of women have played special roles as teachers. The story of dance in Cuba would be incomplete if it did not include "courageous mothers" such as Ramona de Saa (National Dance Prize, 2006), who has contributed more than anyone else to the the Cuban School of Ballet's lush and blooming tree; Josefina Méndez, the queen of tragedy,



Carlos Acosta with two Cuban dancers

Estrella de Oro in Paris, Sagitario in Italy, a volcano, an incontrollable force that many still remember for her representation of Cecilia Valdés; Caridad Martínez, our *prima mulata assoluta* who was never able to dance *Giselle* in Cuba because she was black, and who founded, with Rosario Suárez (Charin) and Mirta García, Havana's Ballet Teatro; and Loipa Araujo, whose tropical temperament was always captivating. Menia Martínez, Rosario Ochoa and Mirta Mermida would also have to be on that list.

Given the aesthetic of Cuban ballet was constructed by many people, the singular worship of Alicia Alonso is discomfiting. It is an obvious aberration both in the official press and publications like *Revolución y Cultura* o *Cuba en el Ballet*. The same could be said for all texts published about ballet. With a stroke

of their pens, historians Miguel Cabrera and Pedro Simón have erased the excellent black dancers that were part of said school, and are now ballet stars in numerous companies around the world.

The survivors of a lost age are never prominent figures in Cabrera's many publications. The contributions of the likes of black ballet dances like Caridad Martínez, Andrés Williams Dihigo, Catherine Zuasnabar, Julio Arozarena, Rosa Ochoa Simoneau (an angelic dancer), Alberto Terrero, Alexander Pereda, Roberto Machado, Fidel García, Víctor Carnesoltas, Gabriel Sánchez and Amilcar More González, who was with the Joven Ballet Francés and then with German company *Bayerisches Staatballet*, are all moored to a market of silence in Cuba, despite the fact that we

Cubans have dared to conquer the world through dance.

Classical dance speaks Spanish, too. According to specialty magazines, 10% to 15% of the members of the world's leading dance companies are Hispanic, and dances from Cuba are the largest cohort, followed by Spain, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. Cuba was the point of departure.

Caridad Martínez Menocal is our *prima mulata assoluta*: she founded projects as important as the Ballet Teatro of Havana and the Cuban School of Veracruz (in Mexico, 1993), is the academic coordinator of the professional program at the Ballet Hispanico School (in New York), and directs the Ballet School of Brooklyn. As an artist, she is master of her own road: she continues to challenge time. Caridad was a singular case at Cuba's National Ballet, due to her incredible skill in so many techniques, but her own, personal style. Many Cubans remember her performance at the *Muñecos* ballet, by Alberto Méndez. Her contemporary aesthetic clashed with classical propensity of the company led by Alicia Alonso. Although Havana's Ballet Teatro lasted five years, Caridad Martínez Charín y Mirta García deeply shook the Cuban dance world because they incorporated into their dance styles the best of their contemporary body language.

Andrés Williams Dihigo, a dancer and choreographer from the Cuban National Ballet, debuted in 1970 and became lead dancer in 1986. He has been invited as a visiting artist to Dresden (Germany) and international festivals in Santander (Spain) and Verona (Italy), and the Ballet of Zimbabwe. He has his own, very unique and haughty style on stage. Ballet enthusiasts remember him for his singular characterization of Othello in *Prologue for a Tragedy*, by Brian MacDonald, and the beast hunter in *Canto Vital*, by Azari Plisetsky.

Julio Arozarena, also known as Mesie Julio, and who is from Havana, the body is the vehicle for achieving a state of trance and hallucination. He is one of the best dancers of his generation not only in Cuba, but also around the world. He was a member of the Niza Ballet. During the nineties, he was one of the Bejart Ballet's principal soloists (Lausanne) and is today its artistic assistant director. He was a wonderful student of Maurice Bejart, the dean of dance, who changes gesture and idea in the world of dance. Arozarena created a live space within this world-renowned dance company. Unlike many of his colleagues, he declares he was not a victim of racism at the Ballet de Cuba, but acknowledges its presence there and in Cuban society, like a bright red tattoo. Ballet critics consider Arozarena the chocolate prince, a man who seems to forget that in Cuba he was a blackbird.

Many Cubans also recall Pablo More when he danced the part of Sigfried in *Swan Lake*. His style was sober and technically confident. The Mexican dance movement became enriched when he went there as a teacher.

Xiomara Reyes, a prima ballerina for the Flanders Royal Ballet for years, is the second Cuban woman, after Alicia Alonso, to reach the top of the American Ballet Theater (ABT). She has had the opportunity to be Lise in *La fille mal gardée* [The Wayward Daughter]. Her favorite roles were Giselle, Manon and Juliette.

Viengsay Valdés Domínguez is one the Cuban Ballet School's most solid values, one of the stars of the twenty-first century: she is tiny and powerful. According to Sara Kaufmann (*New York Times*), "VV's incredibly lengthy balancing acts are there to impress, and they do. She is a special ballerina, one of those who can impose herself on an audience of more than two thousand people with a simple bat of her eyelashes." With her, a searing

series of dizzying *fouettes* makes everything blurry, but her balances detains time. She is a jewel of the ballet, Carmen in St. Petersburg, a Cuban Carmen in Russia; living proof of eros in space—real and supernatural. She is a gem of blinding sparkle, a woman born to be victorious. She would dance in her dreams, wildly. According to Cuban writer Miguel Barnet, “Viengsay is a winged creature that goes through space with the force of a burst of wind; her ascension is frightening.” English critic Ismene Brown (*Daily Telegraph*) considers her to have been one of the supreme ballerinas of that time, along with Aurelie Dupont (Ópera de Paris) and Ulliana Lopatkina and Diana Vishneva (Ballet de Kirov). She is gay, beguiling, seductive, mischievous, optimistic and agile, just like the people she portrays: Carmen, Diana, Swandil, Kitri, Odette/Odile. Viengsay Valdés, is a ballerina who attacks and defends with virtuosity. Challenges delight her.

Carlos Acosta (National Dance Prize, 2011) is a virtuoso tiger, albatross, prince and pauper. Awarded the Princess Grace Kelly Award, he is the most revered by the dance world’s elite. His spectacular leaps when executing *pas de deux* in *The Pirate*, and his art both shake even the most demanding of audiences. He is a world conqueror, a stage warrior, a man who ceased adoring a swan to take on the challenge of roles requiring greater emotion and physical strength, like Spartacus, Albrecht, Sigfried, Romeo, etc. For Acosta, dancing in the role of Spartacus is like playing Antonio Maceo, our own Bronze Titan. He is one of the dancers who has made blacks very visible in the world of ballet. In an interview given to journalist Marilyn Garbey (*La Gaceta de Cuba*), Acosta declared that “blacks and *mestizos* have not been given the opportunity to show what they have inside. I

am a witness to the fact that the world is ready. The Bolshoi is ready to invite a black to dance the part of Spartacus; the Opera de Paris is ready to invite a black to dance Nureyev’s *The Temple Dancer*.” Vanity is indecent for Acosta. Like José Manuel Carreño, he is proud of having grown up in the Cuban School of Ballet. Those Cubans of us who admire him, are still waiting to read his autobiography *No Way Home* (2008) someday.

Other outstanding black dancers in newer promotions are Romel Frómata, José Carlos Lozada and Verónica Corveas, an ebony princess who the Cape Town City Ballet (in South Africa) has sought as an invited artist. Just like Yolanda Correa, prima ballerina of the Ballet Opera of Oslo, many of our African descendant ballet dancers are members of a select Club of Stars at a worldwide level.

The Cuban School of Ballet is not yet unity of style within diversity. One of its challenges is to be a true laboratory for diversity, a *mélange* of races with the firmness of our identity is unshakeable, bulletproof. Yet, with this in mind, it is not going through its best moment. Its racial profile is still not overt or illuminated.

Each and every one of its bodies bears the memory of an island, and island that has ceased rescuing victims of shipwrecks who still dream. For them, dance is a space filled with freedom. Their bodies register tensions and construct lines and dreams. Dance is an exercise of memory, rebelliousness and resistance.

They have all managed to break the secret code of Cubanness on each of the stages upon which they have performed. They are the essence of Cubanness. For them, Cubanness is to interpret the imagination’s platform, making a sacrifice for dance. They are part of other island maps.