

Alicia Alonso and the National Ballet of Cuba



The National Ballet of Cuba was and remains the creation of one woman, Alicia Alonso, one of the 20th century's greatest ballerinas. A self-taught young prodigy from a ballet-less island, she became a legendary Giselle. George Balanchine created his glittering 'Theme and Variations' for her, she was the first Lizzie Borden in Agnes de Mille's 'Fall River Legend', and Michel Fokine himself coached her in 'Les Sylphides'. This was all the more extraordinary given that Alonso became blind in her early 20s and danced in the dark for decades thereafter.

When still very young, she went home to start up Cuba's first serious ballet school. Sixty years on, this isolated island of only 11 million has become a world powerhouse of ballet talent, particularly male, of whom Carlos Acosta (Royal Ballet) and José Manuel Carreño (American Ballet Theatre) are recent exemplars.

Cuba's ballet strongly - and controversially - reflects the times and tastes of its creator, its 'Giselle' production in particular feeling like stepping back 60 years. Contradictions crowd in. Here is a socialist country where men and women dance like gracious royalty. Communism gives all children equal chances, yet it is expressive individuality that marks out Cuban artists. You expect brilliant exhibitionism from Hispanics, but there is also a poetically disciplined finesse.

Their teachers are regularly asked to share their secrets with Paris Opera Ballet, the Royal Ballet, companies of North and South America. Those secrets, I suggest, lie in the personality of Alicia Alonso, a woman of epic contradictions: draconian and inflexible, yet a mother to her country's children, an awesome cult figure and yet a matchless artist unstintingly passing on everything she has learned.

Now 83, she has finally left the stage - I saw her dancing a 'Swan Lake' pas de deux in her late 60s, magnificently, despite my doubts - but retains absolute control over the national ballet. Meeting her in Havana recently, I asked her how Cuba keeps producing so many fine dancers.

"I think because we get more of a chance to look at all the talent, and there is a future for them. We have ballet schools now all over the country, and every year we audition, and wherever we find talent we give a free education. If they continue to develop their talent they come into the company, and there is their career."

Cuban children, she believes, have natural ballet potential. "They have a very good ear for music. And the climate here, that makes the muscles warm, you move easily. And rhythm - don't forget, we are Caribbean, we are mixed, we listen from our earliest years to drums, to Spanish music and African music. Rhythm we have inside us."

Alonso's family are of Spanish blood, the island's upper class, and though wealthy Spanish-Cuban parents hired ballet teachers for their daughters, a profession was only possible abroad. At 16, she seized her fate; she married Fernando Alonso, a fellow ballet student, and despite the rapid birth of their daughter, Laura, they set off for New York, along with Fernando's brother, Alberto, Alicia's partner and later choreographer.

An early job was on Broadway with Ethel Merman - the singer insisted on seeing baby Laura in her dressing-room every day. ("Though she could look rough, Miss Merman was a very soft, kind lady.") But in 1941 she joined the rapidly blossoming American Ballet Theatre. Prima ballerina Alicia Markova was the definitive Giselle, but before long some were saying this new Alicia was as good. Alonso speaks fondly of Markova: "We danced so differently but the idea of the style of the romantic era we had was very much alike - this idea of having no weight when you danced. I still have in my head, watching her doing Giselle, the first Giselle I saw in my life... I will never forget it, it was beautiful."

At ABT she also learned modern ideas from a headspinning roster of choreographers, Fokine, Balanchine, Massine, Tudor, even the visiting Frederick Ashton, who urged her to join the Sadler's Wells Ballet. However, at only 25, with world fame beckoning, she decided to dedicate herself to pushing ballet beyond private, amateur circles in her native land and towards professional ideals. She made enemies of the Batista regime, but after the 1959 revolution found a fellow traveller in Fidel Castro, who has made the Cuban ballet his personal crusade too.

As Alonso points out, "You don't know where you will find talent. It could be anywhere. A family of artists, or a daughter of a miner or taxi-driver." Does she think almost all Cuban children could be good ballet-dancers? "A very high proportion."

She and her husband Fernando built a unique teaching method on Alonso's eclectic experiences and even on her blindness, which gave her insights into control, balance and stage sense that feed even now into Cuban skills. "You see, I was the only example available. I had taken class from every good dancer and every good teacher I could find. I had experimented with my own body, I made my own career. As a ballerina I could not only talk about it and teach it, but I demonstrated it too. And I taught the boys how to hold me, how to partner."

And a lot of boys were needed, as Alonso danced on and on through the decades. It cruelly frustrated generations of girls, but turned Cuba's ragged, vivid lads into noble princes and macho heroes fit for a prima ballerina.

Although her unyielding grip on ballet motivates frequent defections of dancers to overseas companies, Alonso remains certain that her media-restricted society benefits the arts. "When you see good ballet, the imagination creates something that builds you inside. Not like seeing bombs and destruction on the television or newspapers every day, which confuses children. That's the advantage we have in Cuba. Our children go to school, we pick them up at 5, take them to dancing and they stay until 8, they have dinner, then they study, then go to bed. We are trying to take them off the streets, to class to learn art and painting and music, and away from these bwing-bwing-bwing computer games that make them idiots."

An outstandingly skilled generation of teachers is in place to continue the work - if they get the chance. "I expect to live 200 years," Alonso declares.

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