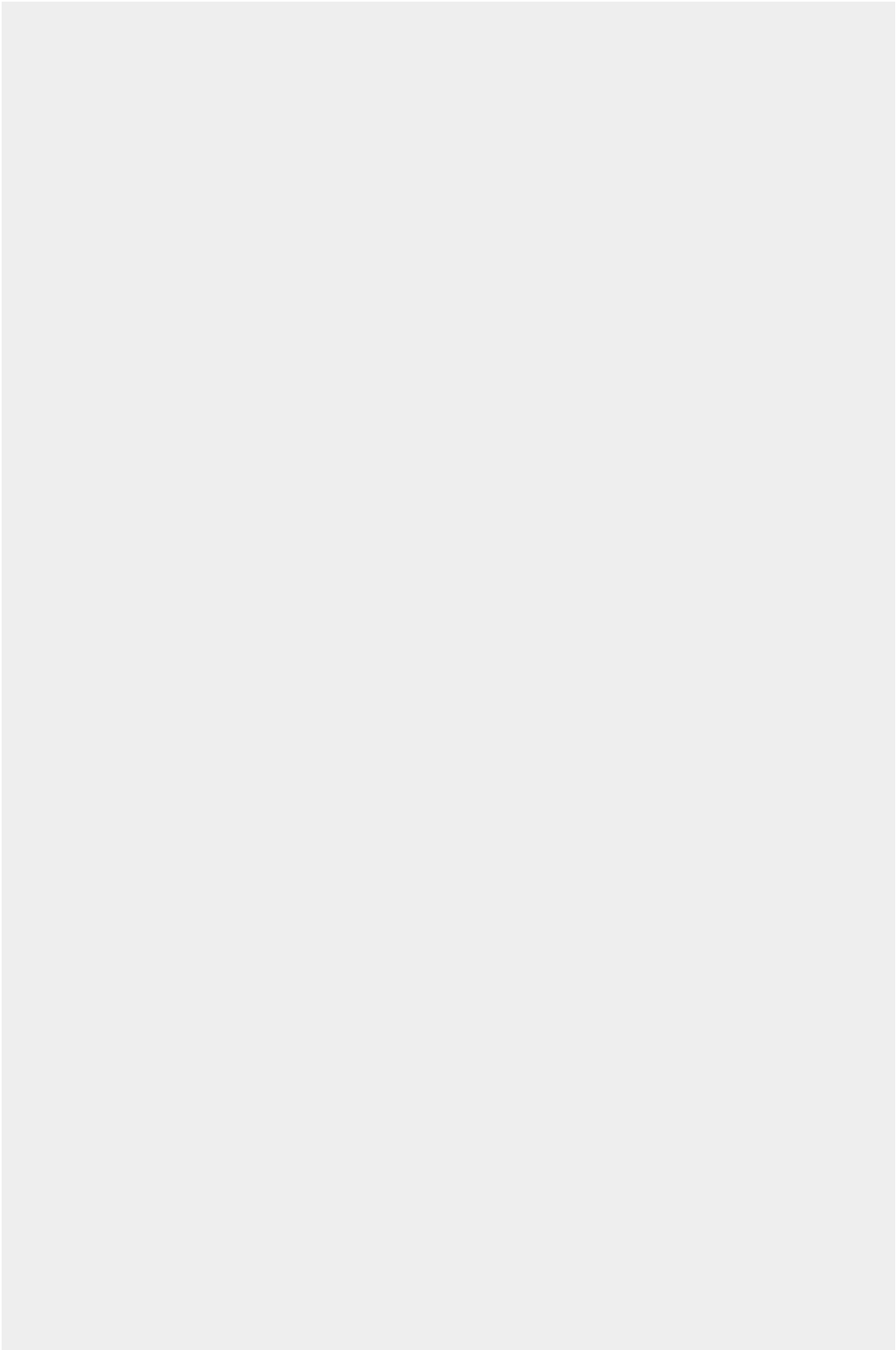




Alberto Alonso



Alberto Alonso, the Cuban choreographer who died in Florida on December 31 aged 90, was one of the triumvirate which from scratch made Cuba one of the great ballet nations; he also created one of the world's most famous ballets, Carmen Suite, for two celebrated prima ballerinas, the Bolshoi's Maya Plisetskaya and the Cuban Alicia Alonso, his sister-in-law.



Alberto Alonso was Cuba's one major ballet choreographer, developing a fusion style unique to his island that combined unselfconscious eroticism, Afro-Hispanic folklore drama and ballet's more athletic elements.

Watching the Cuban National Ballet perform one of his ballets on a Moscow tour in 1966, Maya Plisetskaya felt "as if a snake had bitten me". Going backstage at the interval she demanded that Alberto create a ballet for her on the theme of Carmen, using music by her husband, the leading composer Rodion Shchedrin.

However, Alonso soon found himself the centre of a tug-of-war between two legendary ballerinas, as Alicia Alonso demanded that he make the work for her too; so he created two versions, one for Russia and one for Cuba.

No foreigner had been allowed to choreograph in the Soviet Union before, but, as a Cuban, Alberto Alonso was finally, if grudgingly, permitted entry to work with Russia's most popular ballerina, against the wishes of the Bolshoi Ballet director Yuri Grigorovich, who disliked Plisetskaya.

Alonso arrived in Moscow in early 1967 without a hat, having no acquaintance with snow or sub-zero temperatures. He instantly succumbed to a severe chill. Possessing only a short visa, the following day the feverish Alonso threw himself into the choreography. The Moscow premiere, on April 20 1967, outraged government circles.

Plisetskaya played up Carmen's dissident fire, and the brevity of her black leotard and the explicitness of the arabesques caused the cancellation of a second performance on the grounds of it being unacceptably erotic and unballetic.

After Shostakovich had intervened in the score's favour, however, and after Plisetskaya had agreed to wear a chiffon skirt and tone down some of the steps, the ballet was permitted another showing.

Plisetskaya eventually performed it more than 350 times around the world. It became one of the most iconic of the Bolshoi ballets, copied in competitive skating, gymnastics and synchronised swimming routines.

The following August, in Havana, Alicia Alonso premiered a more Hispanic version of the ballet, personalised for her by Alberto, with Plisetskaya's brother, Azary Plisetsky, as her partner. The rival merits of the ballerinas' interpretations remain hotly debated.

Alberto Alonso himself described Plisetskaya as tough, brave and confrontational, and Alicia Alonso as a more sensual, Latin temptress.

The ballet remains coveted by ballerinas as a star vehicle. When the Bolshoi's Anastasia Volochkova showed it in 2001 in London, The Daily Telegraph described her performance as "naff" and aiming "straight for the pelvic region".

Alberto Alonso was born on May 22 1917 in Havana, the younger brother of Fernando, who would marry the ballerina Alicia Martínez Hoya. The three of them would work closely together for almost 60 years, forging Cuban ballet, which today boasts many world stars, including the Royal Ballet's Carlos Acosta.

After the brothers took dance lessons with visiting Russian teachers, the 17-year-old

Alberto Alonso was hired by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo when it visited Cuba in 1936. He was the island's first professional ballet dancer.

During the next five years he toured the world alongside such major stars as Alexandra Danilova and Leonid Massine, and married his first wife, the Canadian dancer Patricia Denise Myers, known as Alexandra Denisova.

In 1941 Alberto Alonso resettled in Cuba, co-directing Havana's ballet school with Denisova. From 1943 to 1945 he returned to performing, joining Fernando and his dazzling young wife Alicia at New York's Ballet Theatre (now American Ballet Theatre), where she was regarded as Alicia Markova's natural successor as reigning star.

Alberto Alonso himself danced many leading roles in character ballets by Fokine, Balanchine and Massine.

In 1948 the three Alonsos returned home to establish Cuba's first national ballet company. Alberto became his country's formative creative force, experimenting with a fusion of ballet, Afro-Cuban folklore and pop-dancing, which was becoming popular through the growth of television.

Among Alberto Alonso's many ballets for the Cuban ballet were *Antes del Alba* (1948), *Rapsodia Negra* (1953), *Espacio y Movimiento* (1966), *El Güije* (1967), *Un retablo para Romeo y Julieta* (1970), *Conjugaciones* (1970) and his 1982 version of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, *Cumbres borrascosas*, in which the 60-year-old Alicia Alonso played Catherine Earnshaw.

Carmen Suite became a staple of Tokyo Ballet in 1972, through a Plisetkaya family connection, but otherwise Alberto Alonso was unable to capitalise on his hit on the world stage.

Cuba's isolation and Alicia Alonso's monopoly of roles caused increasing frustration for Alberto Alonso and his second wife, the dancer Elena del Cueto. In 1962 del Cueto sought asylum in the United States, taking their daughters with her.

In 1991, a particularly harsh period following the Soviet collapse, Alberto Alonso's son defected, followed by the septuagenarian Alberto and his wife Sonia, settling in Florida.

His enraged sister-in-law staged *Carmen* in Havana without his permission, but Alberto himself was now free to stage the ballet for American and South American companies, and to teach the Cuban ballet style to Americans.

In 2005 he returned to Moscow when, to mark Maya Plisetskaya's 80th birthday, *Carmen Suite* was performed by the Bolshoi Ballet.

Following divorces from Alexandra Denisova and Elena del Cueto, with whom he had two daughters, Alberto Alonso married, in 1964, the dancer Sonia Calero, with whom he had a son. His wife and three children survive him in America .