



## Fernando Alonso

Fernando Alonso, who has died aged 98, was the architect of Cuba's emergence as a world power in classical ballet and played a crucial part in saving the career of his superstar ballerina wife, Alicia Alonso, after she became blind when young.

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The 20-year-old ballerina was emerging as a major new talent in New York when she suffered detached retinas and effectively lost her sight. Ordered by doctors to lie motionless for a year after a series of operations, she feared her career was over before it had even begun. But as she recovered, Fernando sat beside her, helping her to retain her body's memory of her leading roles through tiny movements of her feet and fingers. Within two years she had returned to the stage and, despite permanent visual impairment, built one of the great careers in dance.

It was an experience that transformed not only her life, but also Cuban ballet. For after observing how his wife had learned to balance without seeing, and continued to deploy brilliant speeds in spins and travelling jumps, Fernando Alonso developed an analytical understanding of dance mechanics that generated an explosion of talent in his homeland. As a result of his unique methodology, Cuban ballet dancers are trained to match a remarkable sense of balance with a bravura style.

While the Caribbean island might seem an unlikely base for the aristocratic old-world art of classical ballet, Fernando Alonso identified real affinities: “Cubans inherited from the Spaniards a virile sense of dance, with a hint of toreador-like aggression. From the Africans, we inherited a readiness to demonstrate those feelings with repetitive rhythms, plus a pronounced masculine sexuality in the men and natural charm in the women... It’s the male and female elements which create a Cuban way of dancing.”

Fernando Alonso was born in Havana on December 27 1914, the elder of two sons of Laura and Matias Alonso, who were of Spanish extraction. Mrs Alonso ran a musical and dance society, and the brothers took dance lessons with a resident Russian ballet teacher. Their fellow student was a girl who lived nearby, Alicia Martinez Hoyo, with whom Fernando fell in love.

As she was 15 and he 21, his parents tried to break up the relationship by sending him to Florida to study; but Alicia followed him, and their daughter Laura was born soon after. Fernando’s brother, Alberto, then joined them as Alicia’s ballet partner, and they made for New York. Fernando joined the Ballet Mordkin, Alberto the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo; while young Alicia, toting her baby, Laura, found work in Broadway musicals – the infant became a favourite of Ethel Merman.

The teenage Alicia was a striking but still unfinished ballet dancer, and her husband coached her constantly, applying everything he observed from the international dancers alongside whom he and his brother were performing. In 1941, aged 20, she was hired by the major classical company, Ballet Theater, only to find her nascent career threatened by the detached retinas.

Within two years, however, Fernando had coached her back to full fitness and she was called upon by the company to replace its sick superstar, Alicia Markova, in her greatest role, Giselle. The company arranged for very strong lights, invisible to the audience, to guide the Cuban ballerina. Her male partners were also taught by Fernando to murmur directional instructions to her as they danced.

In 1948, due to disruptions within Ballet Theater, Fernando, Alicia and Alberto returned to Cuba to establish the Ballet Alicia Alonso, formed to support the ballerina’s world tours. The brothers set about training native dancers for the company, and Fernando developed a dance syllabus based on his observations of all the major world ballet schools as well as the insights he had learned from working with his almost-blind wife.

One ballerina recalled how her class was taught to balance on pointe with their eyes closed, so as to master an inner sense of equilibrium. Another of his ideas was to set children spinning on rockers torn off old rocking chairs so that they learned to understand the forces involved in fast turning. To this day Cubans are particularly noted for their combination of old-world Russian stylishness and vigorous technical virtuosity.

During the 1950s the Alonso brothers joined the Communist Party in opposition to General Batista, and after Castro’s 1959 coup they persuaded him to fund a Cuban National Ballet and a national schooling system under their direction.

Under Fernando Alonso's remarkable curriculum, Havana became internationally renowned for its ballet training, despite material deprivations. In the early 1960s Cuba's young ballerinas were regularly winning gold medals in Soviet competitions, and the Bolshoi Ballet, impressed, started exchanges of dancers and teachers.

However, as Alicia became more autocratic as head of the Cuban National Ballet, relations with her husband and daughter broke down. In 1975, after they divorced, Fernando set up a ballet school and company in Camagüey, which is now Cuba's second ballet company, though not permitted by the government to tour abroad.

Cuba's 11 million-strong population continues to support some half dozen professional companies, and Cuban ballet teachers now hold major positions worldwide. Fernando Alonso taught into his nineties, and was awarded Cuba's National Dance Prize for Lifetime Achievement in 2000. He also won the international Benois de la Danse Lifetime Achievement award in 2008.

Fernando Alonso is survived by his former wife, who at 92 still runs the Cuban National Ballet, and by their daughter, also a ballet teacher. Alberto Alonso died in 2007, aged 93.

**Fernando Alonso, born December 27 1914, died July 27 2013**



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