

Cuba's Dance Revolution

By Ana Campoy



Photo by Mimi Chakarova.

Dancers of the Ballet
Nacional de Cuba.

A look at the billings of the world's top ballet institutions reveals one of the lesser known exports of Cuba and one of the major achievements of the island's political revolution.

From their small island Cuban dancers have jumped to the most prestigious stages in the world and become celebrities at companies such as the American Ballet Theatre in New York and the Royal Ballet in London. Critics and audiences alike praise their technique and style.

Such fine ballet didn't naturally sprout from Cuban soil. Fully backed by the state, Cuba's ballet establishment was built from the ground up and yearly churns out dancers sought after by the best companies in the world. But if the dancers' excellence proves the huge success of the Cuban ballet system, the fact that they take up foreign offers instead of staying home underscores its weakness.

Like the island's regime itself, the Ballet Nacional de Cuba has been dominated by a single figure: Alicia Alonso, its founder, director,

maître and choreographer. And like Fidel Castro, she holds a tight grip over her domain.

As a result, many dancers feel they lack the freedom and space they need. So they leave. The latest star to defect is Rolando Sarabia, who on a trip to Mexico last July walked across the border to the U.S. in search of better opportunities.

When I last saw Sarabia in 2001, he was only 19 and dancing lead roles in the classical ballets that are the staple at Havana's Gran Teatro. "Right now I'm not bored, but I don't know if I can do this all my life," he told me at the time.

Apparently, he did get bored, and the Cuban Ballet suffered for it. Still, the bench is full of well-trained dancers ready to take his place. Like Fidel's government, Alicia's company has survived the fall of the Soviet Union, the U.S. embargo and Cuba's many economic woes. Even as the troupe's international notoriety has declined since the days when she was prima ballerina, it has continued to produce excellent dancers. The question is whether ballet in Cuba is strong enough to survive Alicia's death, or

more importantly, Fidel's.

What Fidel is to the Cuban revolution, Alicia Alonso is to Cuban ballet. She even goes by her first name, just like him. But before becoming an icon, Alicia was a dancer and a very good one. Her training began at a school created by the Cuban elite to secure its entertainment after the Great Depression made it more difficult to bring foreign dance troupes to the island.

Very much like the dancers who leave Cuba nowadays, Alicia soon outgrew the local scene and sailed to New York. At the time, ballet in that city was still in diapers and finding steady work was a challenge for any dancer. However, Alicia found a space to shine.

It was at the Ballet Theatre, a precursor of the current American Ballet Theatre. When its star fell ill, Alicia was the only dancer that dared step into her spotlight. After her performance, George Schaffe, a ballet paraphernalia collector, went backstage, untied Alicia's pointes from her blistered, bloody feet and kissed them. "For history," he said as he ran off with the shoes.

Throughout her career the accolades from critics and audiences would continue. "She moves in life. Her feet, her torso, her arms, neck, and eyes, are one continuing action, taking their dynamic from her meaning. She talks. Her heart is open. Here is the essence of a dancer. It is her core she gives us, it is our core," wrote dancer and choreographer Agnes De Mille.

I can attest to that. I watched her dance in 1985, before she retired. She was already blind, and well past the prime of most prima ballerinas, but the fullness of expression she conveyed simply by moving one of her hands, or turning her head was mesmerizing. Watching her on stage it was easy to imagine how she had become an institution in Cuba and established a strong ballet tradition in a country that had none.

After her success in New York, Alicia returned home to start a ballet company and school with her husband, Fernando Alonso, and his brother Alberto Alonso. It was a time of political unrest. A few years after they started, Fulgencio Batista overthrew the elected government in the 1952 coup. While Fidel plotted to overthrow his regime, Alicia chipped at it in her own way. When the President insisted that her troupe earn



Photo by AP Wide World

Alicia Alonso in London, 1953.

a subsidy by becoming part of his government, the Alonsos refused. Alicia wrote a public letter to condemn Batista's "bribe" and organized a national tour to denounce it. In white tutu and full makeup, she appeared at the end of each show to promise that she would not set her pointes again on the Cuban stage until Batista left it. She kept her promise, and a few months after Fidel and his *barbudos* marched into Havana, the revolution embraced her company.

Alicia was away and Fernando was reading a book when their daughter Laura announced the visitors. "Tell them to come up," he said. In walked Fidel Castro and one of his collaborators. Sitting at the edge of the bed, they talked with Fernando about world and local politics for hours until Fidel said, "I came to talk about ballet."

"I always have time to talk about ballet," Fernando recalls saying.

"How much money do you need for the ballet company to start up again?" Fidel asked. "I don't

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know, Comandante, \$100,000," answered Fernando.

Fidel, Fernando says, gave them \$200,000.

"The revolution was a beautiful thing in the beginning," Fernando says.

While in the U.S. private money struggled to jumpstart a dance establishment, in Cuba the government declared that ballet was "one of the most elevated and beautiful artistic manifestations" and it would strive to make it available to "all social classes, preferably to workers and other popular sectors." This support materialized the Alonsos' dream to create a Cuban school of ballet that would take the best elements of all the others, to train children under it and develop great dancers. In 1964, when they traveled to the international ballet competition in Varna, Bulgaria, the rest of the world got its first glimpse of the Cuban miracle. "Before the competition we realized there were some Cuban names, but we did not think anything of them," says Arnold Haskell, an English ballet expert who attended. "And remember that we at Varna thought we knew everything about the world of ballet and that nothing could surprise us."

The Cubans did. Their technique mesmerized and they walked away with gold medals. The Alonsos' experiment had worked, and now everyone wanted a part of it. Suddenly, says Haskell, "Everyone in the ballet world talked about Cuba." Countries from Mexico to Argentina dispatched their dancers and teachers to the island to pick up the new expression. And like the doctors and the *guerrilleros* sent to the third world by Castro to represent the Cuban Revolution, the ballet sent its dancers to France, the Soviet Union and Japan.

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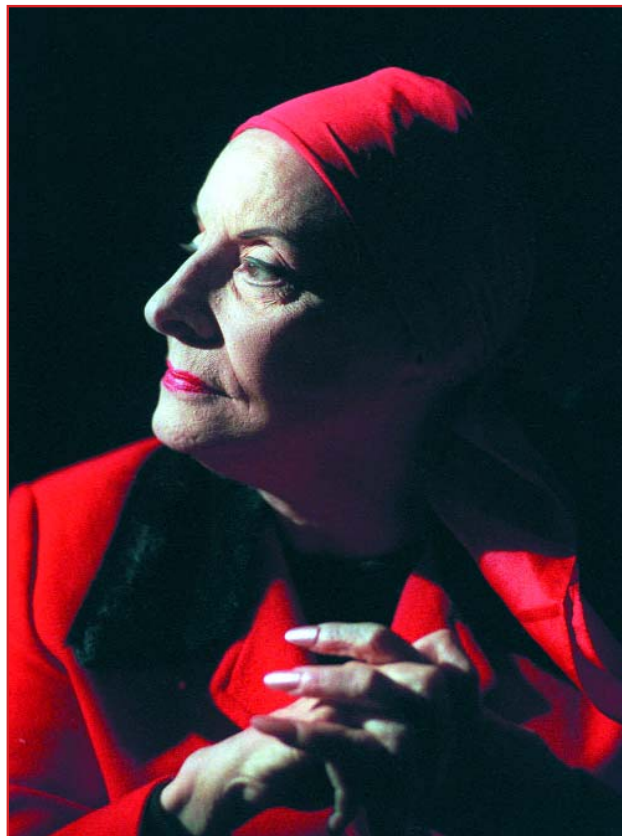


Photo by AP Wide World

But not all those who left were ambassadors of the new order. In 1966, during the starkest period of homosexual persecution in Cuba, ten male dancers defected on a tour in Paris.

Those who stayed became tired of Alicia over the years. One of them was Jorge Esquivel, who became Alicia's partner at 18 and danced with her for another 18 years. Alicia, he says, ruled more like the mean stepmother than like the princesses she danced on stage. Dancers who obeyed went on tours, those who balked stayed at home. But even the ballerinas who behaved found few rewards other than travel. "Alicia wanted all the good roles for herself," says Esquivel. His wife at the time, Amparo Brito, won the gold medal in Varna when she was eighteen years old, but Alicia failed to move her up to important roles until she turned forty, an age at which most dancers have retired to teaching. "We were like pawns on a chessboard with someone moving us around

Alicia Alonso, General Director of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, 1998.

at their convenience,” says Esquivel, now a character dancer at the San Francisco Ballet. “Alicia stopped being human [and began] to mistreat people. She wouldn’t pay us our money.” In 1986 he left the ballet and continued dancing independently in Cuba and occasionally abroad. On a tour in Italy in 1992, the prince finally defected. “I was tired; I wanted my freedom,” he says.

Alicia is now fully retired from dancing. She can hardly move or see, but she’s still the ballet’s boss. She decides what everyone wears, who will go abroad, with whom they will dance, and, of course, what they will dance. For the most part, they dance whatever Alicia has created, a fact that has as much to do with money as her attachment to the classics. The Sociedad General de Autores y Escritores de España registers Cuban works and pays their authors royalties any time they are performed outside the island. Since Alicia determines the repertoires, she also gets paid frequently.

But the dancers want to experiment with more modern fare, and the Ministry of Culture is well aware the ballet needs some new choreographic blood. Its officials, too, were sitting in the audience a few years ago when the Washington Ballet performed in Havana. In fact, it was

through their efforts that the American company was able to visit and present modern pieces danced to jazz. Martha, a 24-year-old dancer still remembers the single male body dancing in ways she had never seen before. “His sole presence filled the stage, he was a great dancer, he had a good turn and good jump, but the way he moved... I don’t even know what you call that,” she says. Like a solitary ballerina twirling in a music box, the Ballet Nacional is mostly isolated from the ballet world. As a result, it already lags several decades.

“I am the first to say that it is important to conserve the classics, but we must also do new stuff,” Eduardo Blanco, a choreographer at the ballet, told me when I was in Havana in 2001. What he had in mind were the contorted and asymmetrical moves from modern dance. “It is not the same thing to make a *tour jeté* and cry ‘aahhh’ in the middle of it as to do it with a little arm,” he said stretching his right arm gracefully in the classical form. “That has been done a thousand times. In ballet everything is invented already.” He was trying to innovate.

One of his creations included a girl wearing a pointe shoe on one foot and a character shoe on the other, and another was about a couple with AIDS. In 2001 these works had only been staged

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Rehearsal space,
Ballet Nacional de
Cuba.



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Photo by Mimi Chakarova.

A dancer rests during rehearsal.

at the ballet school, and it was hard to imagine Alicia letting him move such experiments to the Gran Teatro. But she did. And in 2004 — despite the defection of five Cuban dancers the previous year, or maybe because of it — Blanco presented one of his new works, *Danzón*, at the Gran Teatro, and the audience loved it.

Blanco, the son of a dancer and a musician, says he choreographs from music, and if he is sometimes frustrated with Cuba, he has negotiated a relationship with Alicia that works for him. Yes, he wants to work abroad, but only if he can return to Cuba. Others have agreed to send part of their earnings to fund the ballet in exchange for the opportunity to dance with the world's best companies. Jose Manuel Carreño dances for the American Ballet Theatre under those conditions, and so does Carlos Junior Acosta at the Royal Ballet in London.

But while Alicia has loosened the rein on the company, she has by no means let go. And she

still has the power to pull back. Not every dancer is allowed to dance abroad. Sarabia, for example, was denied that permission.

"There's a capricious will to control, and the exodus is going to continue, because people don't feel well," Sarabia told *El Nuevo Herald*, a Spanish-language newspaper based in Miami, after he defected. "A lot of talent is being developed and everyone is going to do the same when their time comes."

Alicia, like Fidel, won't live forever. It remains to be seen whether their life's work will become a legacy or disintegrate once they are gone.

Ana Campoy is a graduate of the joint M.A. program in Latin American Studies and Journalism at UC Berkeley. This article is based on a piece by the same author published in *Capitalism, God, and a Good Cigar: Cuba Enters the Twenty-First Century*, by Duke University Press.