



# CUBA'S TREASURE: THE YOUTHFUL ART OF BALLET

by Valerie Lawson

Tucked under the curvy mainland of Cuba is an island known in the past by three fabulous names, The Isle of Parrots, The Isle of Pirates and The Isle of Treasure. Reborn in the 20th century as the Isle of Pines, it became, finally, Isla de la Juventud – the isle of youth.

The island could well lend its name to the entire republic of Cuba, as Isla de la Juventud is the perfect description of an island nation whose most astonishing artistic achievement is the youthful art of ballet.

Ballet in Cuba is a source of great national pride. On tour, it represents a travelling showcase of exceptional talent, and, at home, it is an affordable entertainment attracting fervent fans and as much hullabaloo as any sport. Eager young graduates from a network of schools throughout Cuba's provinces feed into the Ballet Nacional de Cuba as well as the senior ranks of international ballet companies all over the world.

Cuban ballet is both self-contained and outward bound. The Ballet Nacional de Cuba (BNC) is a one-nationality company of 96 dancers yet throughout the world, there are more than enough virtuosic Cubans to represent a diaspora of stars. The best known and most charismatic is Carlos Acosta, principal guest artist at the Royal Ballet in London. He left Cuba in 1993 yet remains a symbol of the Cuban ballet miracle worldwide.

His compatriots include five principal dancers in the United States, Xiomara Reyes and José Manuel Carreño at American Ballet Theatre, Joan Boada at the San Francisco Ballet, and Lorna Feijoo and Nelson Madrigal at Boston Ballet, and in Melbourne, Yosvani Ramos, at The Australian Ballet.

At home, the dancers of the BNC attract crowds as enthusiastic as you might find at any sports arena.

"Ballet in Cuba feels like a football match", says Ramos. "If you do something amazing there's a huge response. There's a big, big ballet audience. They know who all the principal dancers are, and every principal has their own supporting team".

The phenomenal success of ballet in Cuba had its origins in the 1950s due to the steely will of Alicia Alonso, a woman who remains as much a figurehead of the nation as the former president, Fidel Castro.

Just as Castro's cap, army shirt and cigar mark the man, Alonso's dark glasses, tightly wrapped headscarf and bright splash of lipstick signal the woman who has let nothing stand in her way.



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Although she was partially blind by her early 20s, she reached the rank of principal dancer in the 1940s and now, close to 90, Alonso has declared that she will never retire from the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, the company she formed more than 50 years ago, with the support of Castro.

In Cuba, politics and ballet go hand in hand. Just as the nation is isolated by the long-standing American trade embargo, Cuban ballet is an isolated art form. The company travels abroad, but Cuban dancers cannot always find an easy passage to another country, especially the United States. Some stars, such as Acosta, are welcome home to perform with the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, while others are persona non grata.

Their cultural limbo may change due to the Obama administration's plan to partially lift the ban on Americans travelling to Cuba. In the wake of this thaw in American-Cuban relations, came the news that American Ballet Theatre will tour to Cuba in November 2010, for the first time in half a century.

The tour will mean much to Alonso herself, as American Ballet Theatre (ABT) was Alonso's springboard to fame. She joined the corps de ballet in 1940, and danced her signature role of Giselle only three years later. As a highly acclaimed ballerina at ABT, then called Ballet Theatre, Alonso created roles in George Balanchine's *Theme and Variations*, Antony Tudor's *Undertow* and Agnes de Mille's *Fall River Legend*.

Yet the public knew little, if anything, of her terrible handicap, her rapidly failing eyesight.

The daughter of wealthy Spanish-Cuban parents, her early life in Havana seemed one of privilege. As a child, she loved to dance whenever she heard music, telling the author Patricia Boccadoro that "I dreamed of having long hair, so I'd dance around with towels on my head, pretending it was my hair streaming out behind me. Then when I was 8, my father, who was a military man, was sent to Spain and my Spanish grandfather suggested I learn Spanish dancing. I loved it so much that when we returned to Cuba the following year, I joined a private ballet school...from the very first moment at the barre I was enthralled".

Aged 15, she fell in love with her fellow student, Fernando Alonso, and a year later, the couple sailed to New York where they stayed with relatives. She took classes at the School of American Ballet, danced on Broadway then joined Ballet Theatre.



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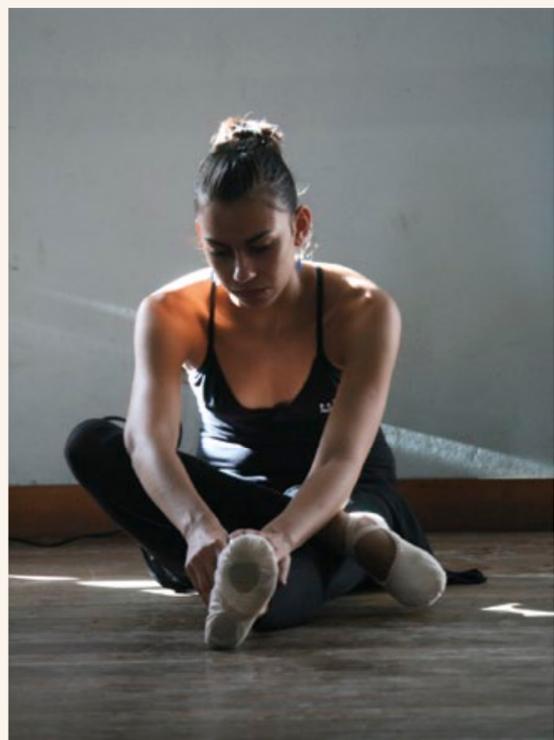


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In 1941, a detached retina meant surgery and enforced bed rest for three months during which she continued to flex and stretch her feet "to keep them alive". After the months in bed, and knowing that the operation was unsuccessful, Alonso returned briefly to dancing before the doctors recommended a second operation. She recuperated in Havana where she learned that the surgery had failed once more. Alonso, now with no peripheral vision, agreed to a third operation in Havana, and this time the doctors demanded a year-long bed rest. With Fernando by her side, and to retain her sanity, she continued to "dance in my mind, and one of the ballets I performed was *Giselle*".

Alonso had already danced in *Giselle* – although not in the lead role – "and I could recreate the actions of all the other characters. My mental dancing became so real that I could watch my own performances and criticise them severely".



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By 1943, she could rest no longer. With only partial sight in one eye, Alonso returned to New York to resume her career. Her dance partners supported her, led her, encircled her, always there, where and when she needed them.

On stage she was guided also by bright lights highlighting parts of the stage, and by a thin wire, at the front of the stage, at waist height.

Remarkably, Alonso danced the role of *Giselle* for 37 years, until she was 60 and she continued dancing other roles until her 70s.

Before the Cuban revolution of 1959, Alonso led two lives. As a ballerina, she danced throughout the world but also, in 1948, established her own Cuban school with her then husband, Fernando, and her brother, Alberto. In 1956, she closed both the school and company, (called Ballet Alicia Alonso and later, Ballet Nacional de Cuba), in protest against the regime of the Cuban president, Fulgencio Batista.



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After the revolution Fidel Castro pledged annual financial backing for the company and the school. The search for new students began, with teachers scouring Cuba, searching for young boys and girls with musicality and the right physique.

In his memoir, *No Way Home*, Carlos Acosta recalled how the head teacher welcomed the newcomers: "Dear students, today we see the beginning of the new school year...you are the foot-soldiers, the men and women of tomorrow, those who will shape the revolutionary future..."

The students were taught by the Bolshoi Ballet's Azari Plisetsky (brother of the ballerina, Maya Plisetskaya), Alicia Alonso's dance partner, Igor Youskevitch and Fernando Alonso who devised the syllabus. Fernando brought to the studio "a blend of influences...from the Italian, French, Russian, and Danish schools, even from musical comedy".

The Cubans, he said, displayed "a virile sense of dance, with a hint of toreador-like aggression" that they inherited from the Spaniards. From their African inheritance, they brought "a readiness to demonstrate those feelings with repetitive rhythms, plus a pronounced masculine sexuality in the men and natural charm in the women".

The men are renowned for their bravura, or a quality that the eminent dance critic, Alistair Macaulay, calls their "athletic but anti-sensationalist style. The emphasis is on heroic ease".

Competition is part of the schooling. Yosvani Ramos recalls that "in Cuba, school is fun, competitive in a nice way. In the break between class and rehearsals the boys would do a piroquette competition or go to where the floor was slippery and you could turn even more". And the Cuban boys did a lot very soon. "I danced my first *Don Quixote* pas de deux when I was 16".



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As for the women, "there is no such thing as a clean double piroquette. You must do three or four. If you don't, the audience will barely clap. You must push yourself. You see these dancers in the company doing these things, so you try to do the same from a young age, to balance, to turn, to jump as much as you can".

And the search never ends for new talent. The former BNC ballerina and now ballet mistress, Loipa Araújo, explains: "I don't know anywhere that has more dance students. We find them in the smallest places and we develop them... they are our hope for the future".

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Valerie Lawson is a dance writer and historian