

**Toba Singer**

*Fernando Alonso: The Father of Cuban Ballet.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013. xxii + 240 pp. (Cloth US\$28.00)

Ballet pioneer Fernando Alonso passed away on July 27, 2013, making Toba Singer's volume about the "Father of Cuban Ballet" a timely contribution to the growing literature on dance history in Cuba. Ballet has become a significant part of Cuban cultural patrimony largely due to the talent, determination, and politics of Fernando, his ex-wife Alicia, and his brother Alberto Alonso. The Alonsos had international performing careers before returning to Cuba to develop ballet in their own country. In 1948, Fernando, Alicia, and Alberto Alonso founded Ballet Alicia Alonso, renamed Ballet de Cuba in 1955 and Ballet Nacional de Cuba after the 1959 Revolution. Today, Cuba joins a small number of countries boasting a distinctive "school" of ballet, characterized by particular manners of movement that ostensibly reflect national identities. Scions of the venerated Cuban school perform with top companies and teach in studios worldwide. Fernando Alonso contributed importantly to this dance legacy, particularly through his teaching methods. He synthesized multiple ballet traditions to create a Cuban aesthetic, and utilized science, such as borrowing from physics and anatomy, to master the art of ballet.

Although Spanish-language scholarship has discussed Fernando Alonso, Singer offers the first full-length examination of his career in English. Historians in both languages have acknowledged the contributions of Fernando to pedagogy and Alberto to choreography, yet Alicia Alonso has reigned supreme over the Cuban ballet establishment and its history. Her fame as a prima ballerina who performed principal roles into her seventies, and her continued leadership as director of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba have secured her central place in the annals of dance history. Fernando, on the other hand, has been marginalized since his divorce from Alicia and his subsequent move from Havana to become the director of the Ballet de Camagüey in 1975. Singer, judiciously addressing the stakes of her project, refrains from both elevating Fernando above Alicia and Alberto and taking sides in Alicia and Fernando's divorce, concentrating instead on the way Fernando furthered the development of Cuban ballet dancers and teachers over the decades (p. xiv). She demonstrates the significance of rescuing the contributions of artists previously undervalued in Cuban ballet historiography as a necessary first step toward reassessing well-hashed narratives.

Rather than offering an analytic reassessment, Singer facilitates the work of future scholars by providing new perspectives and voices in a compilation of redacted interviews. She allows unembellished questions and answers to

make up the majority of the text and shies away from interpreting the material collected from hours of conversation with Fernando Alonso, his family, his colleagues, his students, and the artistic staff of Cuban ballet institutions. The first two parts of the book, “Antes (Before)” and “Después (After),” referring to 1959, center on questions answered for the most part by Fernando Alonso. The third part, “Recuerdos (Recollections),” involves the responses of seventeen interviewees ranging widely in age and levels of familiarity with Fernando. Although Singer mentions aspects of her interview methods, she never clarifies the language in which the interviews were conducted, whether a translator was used, or her approach to the transcriptions. More on the process of researching, editing, and compiling the testimonies would have enriched the text and brought the book into line with contemporary scholarship using oral histories and interviews. However, Singer writes for “a world that has scant information about revolutionary Cuba” (p. x), meaning an audience of English-language balletomanes, teachers, and dancers, and not necessarily scholars of Cuba, the Caribbean, or Latin America. Given her target audience, she succeeds in illuminating the life, work, and personality of a master teacher and in offering valuable lessons about the art and science of ballet.

Although the format, content, and target audience limit the scope of the work, *Fernando Alonso* merits the attention of scholars, not only of Cuban ballet, but also of twentieth-century Cuba, because it opens up a charged debate about the relationship between art and revolutionary politics in Cuban society. In the prologue, Singer challenges an argument made by Cuban émigré Octavio Roca (2010: 26) that Cuban ballet succeeded in spite of the 1959 Revolution, countering that without the Revolution “the advancement of ballet on the island ... would have remained just a dream” (p. xx). While Roca describes how government repression sparked waves of dancer defections, Singer underscores the way government support for ballet (written into law in 1960 and reproduced in an appendix of the book), fomented vast ballet developments on the island. These irreconcilable opinions foreclose dialogue and suggest that scholars would benefit from asking different questions about the politics of Cuban dance. Rather than a stance for or against Castro, a more productive approach would invert the causal relationship: instead of interrogating how the Revolution shaped ballet, scholars might better ask how ballet shaped the Revolution.

This would give dancers and their art greater historical relevance, and it would also open the vista to consider ballet outside the theaters and studios. The streets of Havana today show how ballet has permeated Cuban society—from the famous ice cream shop “Coppelia,” named for revolutionary Celia Sánchez’s favorite ballet, to the numerous little girls with their hair in buns walking to and from ballet classes. Looking at ballet as part of Cuba’s social and

cultural history may offer insights into Cuban political culture by demonstrating how dance functioned within a broader realm of politics, which involved quotidian choices and experiences as well as conscientious articulations of beliefs and opinions. *Fernando Alonso* provides a valuable jumping off point for such inquiries as the multivocal volume challenges future scholars to look beyond fixed spotlights to understand the history and significance of Cuban ballet.

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### Reference

Roca, Octavio, 2010. *Cuban Ballet*. Layton UT: Gibbs Smith.