

ENGLISH



Fernando Alonso and the Hidden History of Cuban Ballet

A new biography celebrates the crucial contributions of an almost-99-year-old master to ballet in Cuba.

By
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Fernando Alonso with student in Betty Oliphant Theater of the School of the National Ballet of Canada, Toronto.

Courtesy of Yolanda Correa Cruz.

Omissions don't always condemn things to silence or inexistence; there are universes where omitting a name or a word is perhaps the best way to highlight it. Such an omission then screams out. This will probably happen to the life and work of Fernando Alonso (b. 1914, Havana), even though he doesn't demand anything. In fact, he says that he would continue to live as he did and enjoy his three great loves: dance, women, and Cuba.

A book recently published in the U.S., *Fernando Alonso, the Father of Cuban Ballet* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013), recognizes the importance of this educator whose efforts helped to strengthen, in the Caribbean island, a school with its own methodology, built from the characteristics of its people and the virtues of other foreign academies.

According to its author, Toba Singer, Alonso's rigorous research of international ballet schools was unprecedented. His study of schools in France, Italy, Denmark, Russia, and England formed the basis for developing his own methodology for a Cuban ballet school.

“Many professors have a kind of sensitivity, but there is no comprehensive program that trains hundreds of students to turn them into not only dancers but also great teachers,” he said.

It’s not hard to find testimonials to Alonso’s importance, as he trained a great number of virtuoso dancers since founding the academy in 1950 in collaboration with his former wife, Alicia Alonso. (Her letter to the author is included in the prologue to the book.) The hard part is publishing a book in Cuba that acknowledges the role of the man who was the brains of the Cuban School of Ballet and the National Ballet in its prime. The University Press of Florida accepted the writer’s proposal as a tribute to the man who spent his high school years in Mobile, Alabama, and joined the American Ballet Theatre—the leading American classic ballet company—in its early years.

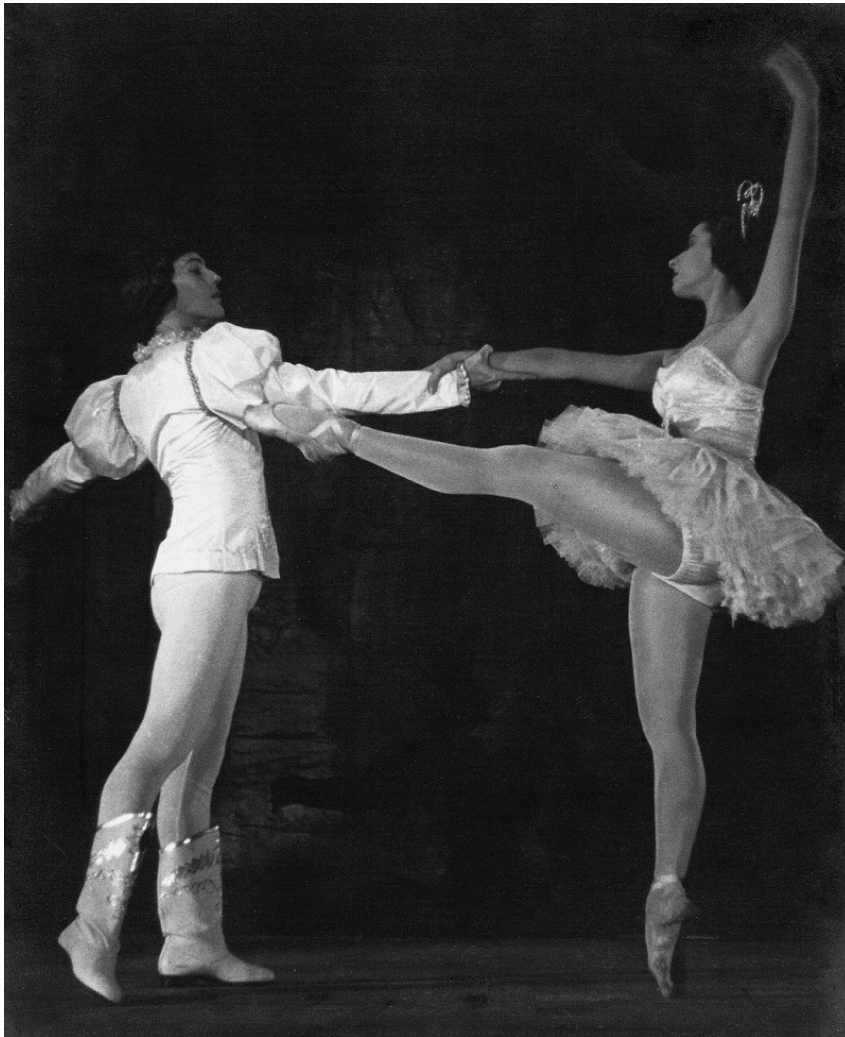
Azari Plisetski, Ramona de Saá, Menia Martinez, Jorge Esquivel, Aurora Bosch, Lázaro and Yoel Carreño, Lorena and Lorna Feijóo, John White, Donald Saddler, and Carlos Acosta, among other ballet dancers and teachers, contributed their perspectives and personal stories concerning the legacy of this master teacher.



Fernando Alonso, The Father of Cuban Ballet

Not surprisingly, Arnold Haskell, the dean of global ballet criticism, defined Alonso as meticulous in his corrections, a scientist and an artist. In the course of the author's research, the dancers and teachers interviewed noted similar characteristics. Singer observed that, even as a young man, Alonso was interested in psychology and philosophy, as well as kinesiology, anatomy of the body, and performance, in order to integrate the most useful part of each specialty into the teaching of ballet.

Anatomical studies conducted in the United States allowed him, in the 1930s, to work as a radiologist in Harlem, and so raise the money to bring Alicia Martínez to the U.S. She would soon become his wife and one of the great dancers of the 20th century.



Fernando and Alicia

Alonso in *Sleeping Beauty*. Courtesy of Fernando Alonso.

The Alonsos joined the company of the American Ballet Theatre in its first decade and took part in the Broadway musical comedies *Great Lady* (1938)

and *Stars in Your Eyes* (1939), where they were called upon to sing and tap dance.

By that time Fernando had several jobs: stenographer-typist in English and Spanish, scientist's assistant, accountant—all of which helped him to later manage that large artistic enterprise that he, Alicia, and her brother Alberto (d. 2007) had dreamed about.

Singer defines Alonso, the first director of the Cuban National Ballet from 1948 to 1975, as a curious and thoughtful man, a committed and non-dogmatic educator who nevertheless insisted on working to achieve the highest standards of discipline and rigor.

When talking about Alonso's legacy, the author highlighted his passing on of experience and expertise to achieve a masterful use of the dancer's tool: the body. "He especially encouraged them to overcome huge challenges by removing their ghosts, doubts that sometimes can be the worst enemy of the dancer," said Singer, who is Dance Selector and Senior Program Director of the Art and Music Center of the San Francisco Public Library, and a graduate of New York's High School of Performing Arts.



Fernando Alonso

“The dance artists and teachers with whom I spoke gave Fernando credit for having shown them a universe of knowledge about science, architecture, ancient cultures, music, literature, theater, and design philosophy outside the ballet studio. They call him the great friend, an honest servant of the arts, a man dedicated to finding answers and solutions, no matter how long or arduous the search may be,” she said. These human values motivated her to travel across the world to gather much more information.

The book acknowledges the help of the University Student Federation (FEU) to the company—today the Cuban National Ballet (BNC)—from its beginnings and during the mid-1950s when the government of Fulgencio Batista withdrew its small grant. That fact caught the eye of the leaders who were building a political, social, and economic revolution in the island, and encouraged the further development of ballet there as an artistic demonstration extended to the people, according to Singer.

Another important event in Alonso’s life was his 1975 appointment as director of the Camagüey Ballet, located in the central region of Cuba. According to the author, the maestro once again demonstrated his skills as the company experienced unprecedented success during his leadership. Even the National Ballet began to attract the company’s best dancers to add them to their standout performers.

“Fernando Alonso is honest with himself, with his thoughts, and with what he considers the best practices in life, no matter the cost. Without him, his courage and commitment, there would be no ballet in Cuba today,” said Singer.

After concluding the work in Camagüey, Alonso served as director of the Mexico National Dance Company in 1992, then of the Monterrey Ballet, and as advisor to the Ballet Department of the Nuevo León Autonomous University in Mexico. He is considered by other professionals as humble and at the same time elegant and demanding. Since his return to Cuba in 2001, Alonso works as an advisor to various schools in Cuba; he loves to work with the new generations.

Alonso has received an Honorary Doctor of Arts, the National Dance Award (2000), and the Benois Award for Dance (2008). He takes part as an educator in the International Meeting of Ballet Teaching Academies, held each year in Havana. The 2013 event dedicated its opening gala to this expert methodologist, who is about to turn 99 years old.

Singer, who has published articles in the *Charleston Gazette*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Dance Magazine*, and *Dance Europe*, among other publications, thanked Alicia and Fernando Alonso's daughter, Laura, for her collaboration with this book and noted that this child of dancers contributed much to the prestige of the National Ballet and later to her own company, the Pro-Danza Center, and by demonstrating her great teaching ability both within and outside Cuba.

"This research was an adventure that became the most enjoyable and fruitful collaboration I have ever had," declared the writer.

After the launch of the book on March 11 at the Brazos bookstore in Houston, Texas, further presentations are planned in California, New York, San Francisco, and London, and many ballet teachers, critics, and Alonso apprentices will attend.

Next year, the author has been invited to present the book in other U.S. cities and abroad. She also anticipates a Spanish-language edition: Fernando Alonso's history merits unveiling in his native tongue.

(A version of this article appeared previously in The Havana Reporter.)