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How Cuba Produces Some of the Best Ballet Dancers in the World

By Noël Duan December 14, 2015 9:01 PM



Recent graduates of the [Ballet Nacional de Cuba](#) School performing at the National Theater of Cuba in Havana in February 2015. (Photo: Getty Images)

[This story is part of a weeklong Yahoo series marking one year since the opening of relations between the United States and Cuba.](#)

Cuba is well known for many forms of dance, from the mambo and the tango to salsa, the cha-cha and the rumba. But only ballet enthusiasts know that the dance form is one of the country's biggest cultural exports. In Cuba, ballet is just as popular as baseball, a sport where players from the Cuban national team regularly defect to the major leagues in the United States.

Unlike in the United States, where ballet is generally considered highbrow art and [Misty Copeland](#) is the only ballerina with a household name, the Cuban government funds ballet training and subsidizes tickets to ballet performances. "Taxi drivers know who the principal

dancers are,” [Lester Tomé](#), a dance professor at Smith College and former dance critic in Cuba and Chile, tells Yahoo Beauty. Like Cuban baseball players, Cuban ballet dancers have made international marks around the world, from Xiomara Reyes, the recently retired principal dancer at New York City’s American Ballet Theatre to London’s English National Ballet ballet master Loipa Araújo, regarded as one of the [“four jewels of Cuban ballet.”](#) In September 2005, Erika Kinetz wrote in the [New York Times](#) that “training, especially Cuban training, has been a key driver of the Latinization of ballet,” an important note, considering that European ballet companies dominated the dance world for decades. The Cuban school combines ballet training from the Soviet Union with Cuban athleticism and rhythm, and its dancers are well regarded for their strength, technique, and artistry.



San Francisco Ballet dancers Lorena Feijóo and Vitor Luiz performing in Tomasson’s The Fifth Season in 2014. (Photo: Erik Tomasson)

Some internationally renowned ballet dancers, like Carlos Acosta, left Cuba with blessings, while other ballet dancers, like San Francisco Ballet principal dancer Lorena Feijóo, were forbidden to return once they left. The success of the Cuban ballet diaspora, with prima ballerinas pirouetting on stages across the world, is a testament of both the outstanding, rigorous training of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba and the lack of opportunities for creative growth in Cuba

— the latter of which Acosta hopes to change with the creation of a new Cuban dance company.



Ballet Nacional de Ballet founder Alicia Alonso and Igor Youskevitch performing in the 1947 American Ballet Theatre production of The Nutcracker. (Photo: Getty Images)

The future of ballet in Cuba is still nestled within the bosom of its 93-year-old founder and artistic director, legendary prima ballerina assoluta Alicia Alonso, who became partially blind at age 19 but was so determined to become a prima ballerina that she learned to dance *Giselle* with her fingers while she was recovering from surgery. Havana-born Alonso trained at Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical with Nikolai Yavorsky, the School of American Ballet in New York City, and with Vera Volkova in London. In 1946, New York City's American Ballet Theatre promoted Alonso

to principal dancer, where she danced the title role in *Giselle* — a ballet she later exported to Cuba, to great success. She returned to Cuba in 1948 to found the Alicia Alonso Dance Company, while continuing to star and produce in ballet companies like the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, the Paris Opéra Ballet, and the Bolshoi Ballet.



*English National Ballet dancer Alejandro Virelles performing The Nutcracker in 2014.
(Photo: Arnaud Stephenson)*

In March 1959, Fidel Castro, having just seized power, gave Alonso \$200,000 and a promise for annual government funding to start the Ballet Nacional de Cuba. Castro wanted to make art and

sport available to everyone, and to this day the company's ballet school asks its trainee students to dance in full professional performances to packed theaters every month. "Everybody goes to the theater, even though it's the exact same *Swan Lake* for 30 years," English National Ballet principal dancer [Alejandro Virelles](#) tells Yahoo Beauty. "I miss the audience. I missing dancing in the main theater — the audience is really warm, and anything you do, they just go nuts. It's really flattering." [Lorena Feijóo](#) agrees with that sentiment. "It's almost a national sport," she tells Yahoo Beauty. "I have been in the biggest theaters in the world, but there's no audience like the Cuban audience."

Dancers who leave Cuba to become principals and soloists in other countries, consequently, give up their faithful audiences for bigger paychecks, opportunities to grow artistically, and the chance to become the next Alonso. According to Tomé, the salaries for top dancers are about \$50 per month, though the government funds many expenses and finds ways to stay within the budget. For example, there is a factory in Cuba that manufactures pointe shoes. Training from age 8 to age 18 is funded by the government at no expense to families. Students are expected to pay for their schooling by spending at least two years in the company. "I will be forever grateful for my education," Feijóo explains about her daily classes, which began at 7 in the morning. "They taught me French, music, piano, character dancing, painting, folklore, and an array of things that were not ballet but prepared me for my profession." Having danced in North America and Europe since she left Cuba at age 18, Feijóo noticed that in other prominent dance companies and schools, not as much time is dedicated to not only technical training but education too.

In Cuba, however, there are fewer opportunities for talented dancers to show off new artistry. "It would be a pity to have had such a great dance education and then not to leave Cuba," Feijóo says. She danced with the Joffrey Ballet in Chicago and the Ballet de Monterrey in Mexico, where she started working with experimental choreographer, director, and dancer [Ann Marie DeAngelo](#). For promising younger dancers, getting out of Cuba means having a mentor, as Feijóo found in DeAngelo. "I was invited to international competitions in countries like Japan, and Alicia [Alonso] would send someone else in my place behind my back," Feijóo recalls, confiding that in her personal experience, Alonso was also more willing to let male dancers — like Carlos Acosta — go abroad and dance for international recognition.

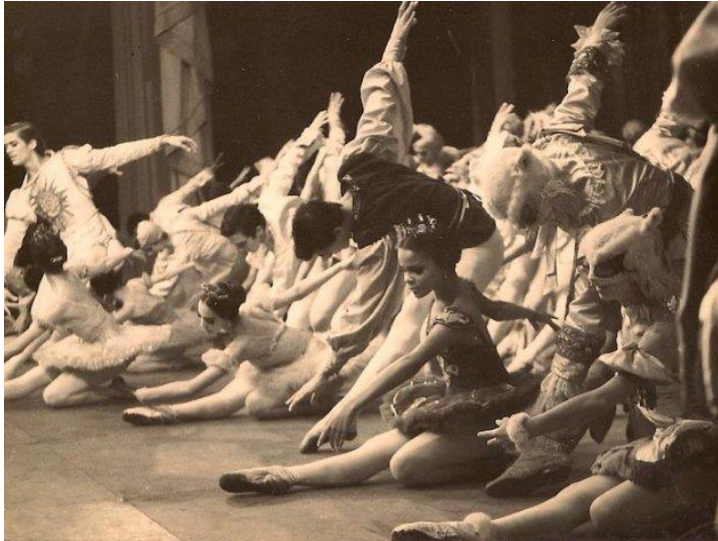


Vadim Muntagirov and Yonah Acosta dancing in the English National Ballet's performance of Le Corsaire in 2013. (Photo: Arnaud Stephenson)

A problem with getting out in the world is that for some dancers, it means they aren't welcomed back. "I'm in a good position in Cuba because some dancers are told to never come back," dancer Yonah Acosta adds. He originally traveled to London with the Ballet Nacional de Cuba and auditioned for the English National Ballet while he was there. One year later, the English National Ballet's director offered him the contract, and Alonso let him leave in 2011. "The Cuban company is great, but it's limited. I wanted to extend my career," he says. He notes that at the ENB, he's allowed to speak out when he's displeased or unsatisfied, but in Cuba, speaking out means being banned from going on tour.

There was a time when the possibility of leaving Cuba at all was not an option. Caridad Martinez, now director of classical training and performance at New York City's Ballet Hispanico, who also trained under Alonso recalls that time: "My generation was very difficult, because we were not allowed to leave Cuba," Martinez tells Yahoo Beauty. She was the first generation of dancers to flee. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 instigated an economic crisis, dancers were performing new choreographies on a regular basis. "The new generation didn't have this opportunity," Martinez says. Martinez's generation of dancers performed works by George Balanchine (known as the "father of American ballet") and Brian Macdonald (a founder of the National Ballet of Canada), as well as innovative homegrown choreographers like Alberto Méndez, whose modern dance choreography won first prize at the

International Ballet Competition in Tokyo in 1978. “I wanted to start creating, and so I left because I didn’t have the resources or facilities to do so,” she adds.



Caridad Martinez performing with the Ballet Nacional de Cuba. (Photo: Courtesy of Caridad Martinez)

The classical ballet world has long been [resistant](#) to allowing black dancers to perform in the same ranks as dancers with white features. Martinez danced all the major roles, but the one role she wasn’t allowed to dance in Cuba was Giselle because she is of Afro-Cuban descent. “Alicia [Alonso] said I couldn’t dance the role because of my nose and because my hair is curly,” Martinez recalls. “Even though there are so many ways to fix this for the role.” After all, while she was training, Alonso and her then-husband, Fernando, had personally taught Martinez how to manage her curly hair and do her makeup. But Fernando left the Havana-based company in 1975 after their divorce, moving to the Cuban city of Camagüey to lead the ballet program there. “Other people entered the company and changed the way the company operated,” Martinez recalls. “They wanted to become a more European company, and so I couldn’t dance anymore.” Feijóo adds that in her experience, black Cuban dancers weren’t discriminated for their body builds, which Misty Copeland has spoken out about as a point of discrimination in the ballet world. “Carlos Acosta is Afro-Cuban, and he’s always been a favorite,” she notes. “Black Cuban dancers are just as thin as the other dancers,” Martinez adds. “But black female dancers still had a harder time than black male dancers advancing in the company.”



Carlos Acosta performing in Havana in 2009. (Photo: Getty Images)

Many of the Cuban ballet dancers abroad do hope to return back to Cuba eventually, in spite of the reasons they left the company. “I am trying to share new choreography and productions with Cuban audiences,” [Carlos Acosta](#), Principal Guest Artist at The Royal Ballet, tells Yahoo Beauty. “In many ways, Cuba has been very isolated from the world and dance has remained stagnant. I want to bridge that gap between what it is now to what it could be.” Acosta, who has been called “the greatest male dancer of his generation,” became a principal dancer at the English National Ballet at age 18. In 2014, Acosta was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire for his services to ballet in the United Kingdom, but he intends to use his talents in Cuba, too. “Every time I perform in Cuba, I feel a sense of going back to my roots,” he says. “I feel so much for that country and its people. I want to dedicate my efforts to bring all these wonderful works of dance to the country that gave me this start in life.” The Feijóo sisters, one of

whom has retired by now, have been in talks with Acosta about a new dance company back on the island.



Retired American Ballet Theatre dancer Xiomara Reyes dancing in New York's Central Park. (Photo: Dane Shitagi/[The Ballerina Project](#))

[Xiomara Reyes](#) began dancing with the youth company subset of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, which was led by Alonso's daughter, Laura. Afterward, she danced at the Royal Ballet of Flanders and sent her audition tape to ABT. "ABT was a dream place, because growing up in Cuba, you'd think we had more Russian videos to watch, but so many of the ballet videos we saw were actually from ABT in New York City," she tells Yahoo Beauty. "I felt like all my training in Cuba prepared me very well," Reyes explains. "I was already 28 when I left the company. I find that dancing has become easier as I get older."

In Cuba, in fact, ballet dancers are expected to perform until they are 55. (In the United States, a 2004 Teachers College report found that the average age of retirement is before age 34.) "If you have a good base, you can use your body for a long time," Reyes explains. After all, in 1995, Alonso gave her final performance at age 75, defying conventions and prejudices about the shelf life of female dancers, and she still holds the reins over the dancers at the national company.

As Alonso, who is now nearly blind, approaches her 94th birthday on Dec. 21, [she still presides](#) over artistic and strategic decisions at the Ballet Nacional de Cuba. In November 2013, company dancers, while on tour in Spain, sent letters of complaints to Alonso, complaining of poor working conditions and low wages that were not even being paid. Some of the dancers had

to skip meals because of their stipends. “What huge damage could it cause the company to set aside 4 or 5 thousand euros to give us a tiny gift after a three-month tour where we made our country and, most importantly, our company proud?” the letter [asked](#). It remained unanswered, and the dancers packed up their bags and went home two weeks later.



Students at a Ballet Nacional de Cuba training session in Havana. (Photo: Getty Images)

Earlier, in 2005, three leading dancers of the company, including principal dancer [Octavio Martín](#), defected, saying [on the record](#) that Alonso had refused to allow them to go abroad. This discontent, however, is mirrored by the reflections of the current diaspora of ballet dancers abroad, who are both grateful for their educations and apprehensive of opportunities back in Cuba for the time being. Reconciling her shortcomings also means recognizing how much she has given back. “If she wants the company to change, the company will change. Cuba will definitely change with what’s happening with America, but I don’t know if the Cuban National Ballet will change.” Yonah Acosta explains. “It might be funded by the government, but it’s still [Alonso]’s company.”