

# Alberto Alonso: National Ballet of Cuba co-founder

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Best-known for his sensual Carmen ballet, commissioned in 1967 by the Bolshoi prima ballerina assoluta Maya Plisetskaya, Alberto Alonso was also a co-founder of the company that became the National Ballet of Cuba.

He was born in Havana, but at an early age moved with his parents to Mobile, Alabama, where he attended Springhill College. On the family's return to Havana, Alberto began ballet training at the Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical, which his older brother, Fernando, and Fernando Alonso's future wife, Alicia Martinez, also attended.

Alberto Alonso began his dance career aged 17 in 1936 with Colonel de Basil's Ballets Russes, touring Europe, America and Australia and dancing roles in a number of ballets by Michel Fokine (including the Blackamoor in Petrouchka), Léonide Massine and George Balanchine. He took part in the company's Covent Garden season of 1938.

In May 1939 in Melbourne, Alberto Alonso married the Canadian ballerina Alexandra Denisova (Patricia Denise Myers) amid considerable publicity. But during the 1940 New York season, when an exhausted Denisova had a miscarriage after dancing six ballets in one day, they left de Basil and moved to Cuba, where Alonso directed the Pro Arte ballet school.

Back in the US once more, he appeared in the 1945 Fred Astaire film Yolanda and the Thief. In 1944 Alonso had also briefly joined Ballet Theater (later American Ballet Theater). He performed in Jerome Robbins's first ballet, Fancy Free, which made striking use of vernacular dance. Alberto Alonso later credited Robbins with inspiring his own combining of ballet with Cuban dance, which would eventually culminate in his famous Carmen Suite.

In 1948, he joined Fernando and Alicia Alonso in forming the Ballet Alicia Alonso, which would eventually become the National Ballet of Cuba. Its ballet school has produced such celebrated dancers as Carlos Acosta of the Royal Ballet and José Manuel Carreño, and contributed to the current explosion of Hispanic dancers across the world.

Among Alonso's early choreographies was Antes del Alba ("Before the Dawn"), of 1947, which the regime of the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista is said to have pronounced "destabilising", and banned from public theatres. Alicia Alonso, however, continued to perform it, and consequently her company lost its small government subsidy.

The commission for a Carmen ballet for Maya Plisetskaya came in 1967. The ballerina happened to attend a musical in Moscow that Alberto Alonso had choreographed based on Cuban themes,

and she rushed backstage to ask him to do Carmen for her. She said in her autobiography that "I felt as if a snake had bitten me." Alonso is quoted as saying that it was something "I've dreamed about. . . all my life."

Attracted to the theme of personal freedom in the Carmen story, she had already planned a ballet on the subject with her composer-husband, Rodion Shchedrin, who had arranged a modern "take" on music of Bizet for the purpose. The Soviet Minister of Culture, Yekaterina Furtseva, objected to the ballet, saying "What we saw was a streetwalker." But Plisetskaya overcame opposition with arguments about the Soviet Union's great friendship with Cuba and then by the force of her success in the ballet.

In New York, Time magazine said, "marvellous Maya . . . swaggers through the role with a shameless, feline verve that commands the eye and utterly dominates the stage". Alicia Alonso starred in the Cuban premiere a few months after, and made it a signature role for herself as well.

When Plisetskaya celebrated her 80th birthday gala at the Bolshoi in 2005, she danced Carmen and brought Alberto Alonso on stage for the tumultuous curtain calls. He staged the ballet for many companies, including American Ballet Theater in 1975.

In 1993, Alonso, and his third wife, the dancer Sonia Calero, defected from Cuba to the United States via Mexico. They settled in Gainesville, Florida. Alonso became master artist in residence at the Santa Fe Community College and resident choreographer for the Dance Theater of Santa Fe. In 2007, the college produced a documentary about him called Dance of My Heart.

(Online obituary from The Independent: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/alberto-alonso-national-ballet-of-cuba-cofounder-784369.html>)