

# Still Dancing, Her Way, From the Soul

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Alicia Alonso, the longtime director of the National Ballet of Cuba, no longer dances with her feet, which, on Monday afternoon at a hotel near [Lincoln Center](#), were daintily crossed at the ankle in a pair of ladylike slingbacks. She is also virtually blind. But when she talks about ballet, her hands, coppery and weathered, flutter near her face as slender fingers, flashing rings and pale pink nails spin and leap through delicate choreographic feats.



Chad Batka for The New York Times

“We were creating the future of the ballet in the United States,” Alicia Alonso said about the early days of American Ballet



Walter E. Owen

Alicia Alonso, with American Ballet Theater in 1955. She gave her final performance in 1995, when she was 75.

“I dance with the hands,” she agreed, quietly smiling. “I do. I dance with my heart actually more. So it comes through my body. I can’t help it.”

On Thursday night Ms. Alonso will celebrate her 90th birthday in a special program performed by [American Ballet Theater](#), for which she was an instrumental dancer in its early days. (She was quick to point out, though, that she is still 89; her actual birthday is not until Dec. 21.) The evening will feature a film retrospective of Ms. Alonso’s career as well as a performance of “Don Quixote” with three principal casts.

Ms. Alonso is at once reviled and adored. Some see her as a political tool of [Fidel Castro](#) as well as someone who has remained too long in her job and who prevents certain dancers from working abroad. In 2005 Rolando Sarabia, then one of the Cuban company’s leading dancers, defected, followed later that year by Octavio Martín, a principal dancer, and his wife, Yahima Franco, also a company member. Mr. Sarabia and Mr. Martín said separately at the time that Ms. Alonso had turned down their requests to dance abroad as other Cubans did, notably Carlos Acosta.

But Ms. Alonso is also adored by balletomanes who cherish memories of her Giselle and her longevity onstage. She gave her final performance in 1995 when she danced “The Butterfly,” a piece she choreographed. She was 75.

“A young lady,” she said before surrendering to girlish giggles. “That’s fantastic, no? Two years before, I danced ‘Giselle.’ ”

Ms. Alonso is either a sly fox of the highest degree or an endearing old lady who wears a scarf — ears covered — with the élan of Little Edie in “Grey Gardens.” In all likelihood she’s both; her demeanor can turn on a dime. She firmly refused to answer any questions related to politics.

“I came here because they are giving me a wonderful reception, a wonderful feeling of coming back,” Ms. Alonso said. “I will talk to you about memories and things like that, and I think we should keep it like that. Don’t you think so?”

Well, not really. But it doesn’t work to force Ms. Alonso to do anything she doesn’t want to do. “I mean there’s nothing I can talk about,” she said. “I’m still a Cuban, I have a ballet company that represents my country, and I’m proud of it. Very.”

Ms. Alonso’s return to Ballet Theater evokes emotions that she said were difficult to put into words. “It reminds me of all the years of my working here, my friends, the times we toured

during the war and of performing. It's a whole life. We were creating the future of the ballet in the United States. It was such a dream."

Ms. Alonso joined Ballet Theater in 1940, but an eye operation sent her back to Cuba, and she rejoined the company in 1943. She was in the original casts of Antony Tudor's "Undertow" (1945), Agnes de Mille's "Fall River Legend" (1948) and [George Balanchine's](#) "Theme and Variations" (1947).

For that devilishly difficult ballet, in which she was partnered by Igor Youskevitch, Balanchine took advantage of Ms. Alonso's technical prowess, challenging her every move. "I remember Mr. B., he looked at me," she began, before imitating his famous sniff, "and said, 'Can you do this step?' I say, 'I try, Mr. Balanchine.' Boom." Then he asked her to try an entrechat six, a leap straight in the air with rapid leg crossings. " 'Are you scared?' " Ms. Alonso sniffed again. " 'No, no. I try, Mr. Balanchine.' "

Ms. Alonso's favorite part of the story occurred after Balanchine heard Youskevitch talking about how easy his variation was and decided to complicate matters. "He almost killed him. After he finished the variation, Mr. Balanchine said, 'Do you like it?' and Igor said, 'No. I'm dead.' "

Throughout the years, as her eyesight worsened, Ms. Alonso continued to dance. While others ran offstage quickly, Ms. Alonso, so as not to crash into the scenery, opted for a slower exit. "They put very strong lights so I could see where is center," she said. She recalled her partner Anton Dolin telling her: "My baby, it's O.K. It looks very well. You just go and float away."

But as helpless as some might imagine her to be, Ms. Alonso is quite sharp with what seems to be a selective understanding of English depending on the question. It took three attempts, for instance, to find out whether she was grooming a successor for her company. After sensing that the line "I don't understand" wasn't going to get her off the hook, she finally blurted: "No. I think they're good all by themselves. They are very capable people, I'm sure. I hope." (Merrily, she crossed her fingers.)

As for her legacy, she said: "I don't want to be remembered. I just don't want to be forgotten."

Ms. Alonso's mantra clearly has much to do with being young at heart. If she should ever step down as director of the Cuban company, she might find work as a life coach.

“If a person keeps thinking, ‘How old am I going to be?’ and thinking about the age” — she raised her voice — “that’s the worst thing you can do. You don’t have to think about how old you are. You have to think about how many things you want to do and how to do it and keep on doing it.”

She clapped her hands and added: “Otherwise, you know what I think? I am going to live to be 200 years old. So I hope all of you do have the same fortune. I would hate to be alone.”

*American Ballet Theater honors Alicia Alonso on Thursday at 7:30 p.m. at the Metropolitan Opera House, Lincoln Center; (212) 362-6000 or [abt.org](http://abt.org).*