Cuban Ballet: Proud Past, Promising Future

By BRIAN SEIBERT / NEW YORK TIMES / MAY 6, 2016

The Key to Cuban Ballet's Future
Credit Lisette Poole for The New York Times

HAVANA — In the Gran Teatro de la Habana Alicia Alonso, the woman with her name on the theater makes as grand an entrance as it is possible to make while being propped up by minders. On a recent Friday, Ms. Alonso, the 95-year-old director of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, was ushered to her balcony seat. She opened her ballerina arms to the audience, who stood and cheered as if at a royal appearance. Ms. Alonso, blind or nearly blind for decades, has reigned over Cuban ballet for more than 60 years, longer than her stalwart supporter Fidel Castro lasted as head of state.

That night, the Ballet Nacional was dancing "Swan Lake" — Ms. Alonso's version, based on the 19th-century Russian original, a staple of a repertory that includes almost no contemporary work. The performance was well-mannered, old-fashioned, trapped in time. It was as it has been.

And yet Ms. Alonso was surely aware of changes around her, including in the theater that now bears her name. Dating from 1838, it reopened in January after renovations, clean and bare on the inside, its ornate exterior casting the brightest glow in the city center, which remains rather dark at night. President Obama gave a speech there during his visit in March, the first by a sitting American president since long before the 1959 Cuban Revolution: a sign of a major shift in relations between the countries, and presumably of incipient change for Cuba.

But what about for Cuban ballet? Ms. Alonso likes to say that she will live to 200 and will still be running the company 100 years from now. She has never chosen a successor. Ask anyone involved with the Ballet Nacional what happens "after Alicia," and you get shrugs and sighs. Change must be coming but probably not while Ms. Alonso is in charge.

More important, though, might be what happens to Cuba's National Ballet School. In 1948, Ms. Alonso — along with Fernando Alonso, her husband at the time — returned to Cuba from the United States, where she was a star, to found a company and a school. After the revolution, the troupe became the Ballet Nacional, funded and protected by the state, and the Alonso school soon went national, too.

The school has supplied generations of dancers for Cuba's national and regional ballet troupes. It has stocked companies across the ballet world, which has long marveled at how a small, impoverished nation has produced so many beautifully trained classical dancers. (Amid a lengthy list, some of the best-known include Carlos Acosta and José Manuel Carreño.) The achievement could justly be characterized as revolutionary.

These days, this company's official historian, Miguel Cabrera — when talking to a Yanqui journalist but even in the pages of Granma, the Cuban Communist Party newspaper — is prone to emphasize the roots of Cuban training in the United States, what the Alonsos picked up from George Balanchine's School of American Ballet and from American Ballet Theater. The Russian (or — whisper it — Soviet) influence is nevertheless undeniable, in elements of style and crucially in the system of tuition-free schools across the island, identifying talent and funneling it to the center. There's nothing quite like it anywhere else.

Whatever the fate of this company, the school is the future of Cuban ballet. So said Mr. Cabrera at the school's headquarters, a grand edifice with marble staircases, built in 1904 for a Spanish social club, commandeered for ballet in 2001, and recently named for Mr. Alonso, the man usually credited with developing Cuban ballet pedagogy. (He died in 2013.) The building is not one of the mildewed antiques that symbolize the island's isolation and disrepair. Like the Gran Teatro, it's a well-scrubbed showplace with an echoey emptiness, as if its current occupants haven't fully moved in.

That isn't to say that it feels uninhabited. On the morning before that "Swan Lake" performance, the second-year boys' class sweated hard for their tough-minded teacher in pursuit of the heroic ease that distinguishes the school's male graduates. Among them were the Ramirez Castellano brothers, identical triplets who have already been the subjects of a documentary.

The boys all displayed a disciplined attention matching the school's reputation, but later a nosy visitor could spy them on break, their gazes fixed on the screens of cell phones. Anywhere else, the scene might be

unremarkable, but cell phones have been legal in Cuba since only 2008. Public Wi-Fi, legalized last year, is not yet available at the school, yet such distractions are on the way, threatening a system that has worked partly by being closed.

Influence from the United States remains limited, though the loosening of travel restrictions may already be affecting ballet education. This past summer, the triplets studied in New York at the School of American Ballet. “The great opportunity of the moment is interchange between schools,” said Ramona de Saá, who has directed the Cuban school since 1965. In the past few years, she said, there has been an unprecedented (and, in her opinion, wholly positive) rise in exchanges with ballet schools in the United States, many run by emigrants from Cuba.

Among them are Ariel Serrano and Wilmian Hernandez, dancers who defected to the United States in 1993. Hired by the Sarasota Ballet in Florida, they settled there, and in 2012, they opened the Sarasota Cuban Ballet School. In New York last week for the Youth America Grand Prix ballet competition, Mr. Serrano said that when he takes his students to Havana, they are surprised by the rigor. “We teach like Cubans, but American culture is more relaxed,” he said. “After the students return, they work harder.”

For all of the less restricted back and forth, though, defections aren’t Cold War relics. Just about every time the Ballet Nacional tours to the United States (most recently in 2011) or even to Mexico, there’s another round; thelatest exodus came in 2013, when seven dancers left.

They all cite the same reasons: the Cuban company’s stagnant and conservative repertory; the restrictions and capricious decision-making concerning travel and career opportunities outside of Cuba; the poverty. United States immigration policy, with its fast track for Cuban migrants, exerts a pull. So does the likelihood of finding work. Check the rosters of American ballet troupes — San Francisco, Boston, Houston, Pennsylvania, Arizona — and you’ll find Cubans.

For younger Cuban dancers, international competitions still offer initial exposure to the broader world. Last week, Narciso Alejandro Medina Arias, 17, a student at Cuba’s National Ballet School, won first prize in the senior men’s division of the Youth America Grand Prix.

Asked about his dreams, he spoke of wanting an international career. What did he think of New York on his first visit? “It’s a very nice city,” he said shyly, “but it isn’t Cuba.”