

Rhythms of Cuba: Revolutionary Dance

Danza Contemporanea de Cuba

THE WORLD FAMOUS DANZA CONTEMPORANEA DE CUBA CELEBRATES ITS 50TH ANNIVERSARY WITH ITS FIRST EVER UK TOUR, BRINGING THE PASSIONS OF CUBAN DANCE TO EIGHT DIFFERENT VENUES ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

Last year marked the 50th anniversary of the Cuban revolution. The overthrow of dictator, Fulgencio Batista, on the 1 January 1959 prompted over 40 years of US embargos and state rationing, but while the country's economic growth was slowly strangled by the revolution, other cultural initiatives were permitted to breathe. Castro's communist ideal denounced the concept of private enterprise, leading to the creation of a struggling, state-run economy. Although this has meant that business in the country is now limited and ineffective, its education and healthcare are among the best in the world. All healthcare is public and education is free from early years through to post-graduate study.

One of the other areas that benefited from increased state-support was the arts and culture sector and, in particular, dance. Dance has long been a part of Cuban culture and in 1948 the indomitable Alicia Alonso introduced the idea of formalized dance, founding Cuba's national ballet company and bearing an influence that still resonates today. However, when the company refused to provide distraction for Batista's actions against student protests in the mid-1950s, all funding was cut and it was only when Castro took up the country's leadership that dance was returned to the national cultural agenda.

Castro supported the development and promotion of dance and the growing connections with the Soviet Union, a country where ballet is taken very seriously, reinforced the position of dance in Cuba. An early tour of the Alonso ballet company across the country to the remoter parts of the island gestured to the role that dance education was to play in the new Cuba. In Cuba, dance is a prestigious career choice and any child showing promise is encouraged from a young age: Havana boasts a primary school dedicated to the study of contemporary dance and it is also on the national curriculum for secondary school students.

With the abolition of the Batista regime and the newfound support for the arts from Castro, a host of dance companies exploded onto the scene. One of the most fundamental of these new companies was Ramiro Guerra's Conjunto Nacional de Danza Moderna, which became today's Danza Contemporanea de Cuba. Contemporary dance is a relatively recent development in Cuba,

arriving with the revolution, and the foundation of the Conjunto in 1959 is considered to mark the beginning of contemporary Cuban dance. Guerra, who danced with Martha Graham's company in New York, moulded the Conjunto's repertoire into a uniquely Cuban blend of modern American theatre, Afro-Caribbean dance styles and classical European ballet.

The popularity of Cuban dance internationally has continued to grow and Cuba has an impressive reputation for the quality of its dancers, counting Carlos Acosta at the Royal Ballet in London and Jose Manuel Carreno at the American Ballet in New York among its exports. Assis Carreiro, Director of the UK's Dance East, suggests that part of what makes the Cubans such fantastic dancers is that "the climate, the heat, the humidity allows for dancers to be very warm, very flexible." However, despite the wealth of talent in Cuba, it is still difficult for these dancers and companies to get international exposure. Due to the relative isolation of Cuba and the economic situation, the companies are lacking in both the budget and resources needed to undergo many tours abroad.

International dance organisations are trying to change this and are keen to see Cuban dance expand on a global scale. The UK's Dance Consortium is one such organisation and has been integral in helping to bring Danza Contemporanea de Cuba (now under the leadership of Miguel Iglesias) to Britain for their first major UK tour. Assis Carreiro, who was responsible for organising the company's performance at Snape Maltings in 2008, explains how the companies have been working together now for four years. They have been teaming Cuban dancers up with international choreographers and working with training institutions to bring children over to the UK to perform: "Cuba is producing some of the best talent in the world but what they are lacking is often choreographic input." Danza Contemporanea de Cuba consists of 60 dancers drawn the Escuela Nacional de Arte and counts more than 70 works in its repertoire. The technical skill and the passion of the dancers are undeniable but without the money to fund new choreography, Cuban dance will be limited in its growth.



Training choreographers in Cuba is difficult because of the social and economic restrictions: dancers are unable to access wider influences from the international community and learn from other choreographers. In light of this, Dance East and Sadler's Wells have commissioned choreographers from other countries to create pieces that enable the Cubans to showcase the full range of their talent and skill, including work by Swedish choreographer, Mats Ek and Dutch choreographer, Jan Linkens. Despite the difficulties, there are still a number of promising choreographers coming from Cuba and Assis Carreiro speaks with passion about one choreographer who has grown from within the company itself.

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George Cespédes, who dances with Danza Contemporanea de Cuba, has choreographed *Mambo 3XXI*, which will make its UK debut on the upcoming tour along with the other, internationally choreographed pieces. Carreiro explains how they hope that this tour will begin to open up perceptions about Cuban dance: “*Mambo* was a real challenge for George because he didn't want to be stereotyped. We asked him to use Cuban music so he used it in a very interesting way. It's not what you expect but it's a very powerful work.” It is significant that Cespédes is choreographing work and showcasing it outside of Cuba: “It's not easy to create choreographers so he's quite special and it's about nurturing and supporting him.” A longer term aspiration for the international dance community would be to have Cespédes begin to make work for companies outside of Cuba and thus develop further as a choreographer, bringing the inspiration and passion of Cuban dance to the international stage.

Encouraging and assisting the Cuban companies to travel with their work will benefit everyone involved: through the collaboration and observation of other cultures, international dance will progress and develop. For Cubans, “because of the hardships dance is a way out for a lot of young people;” it presents

opportunities and “in the ballet company dancers get a car and a flat.” Cuban artists are allowed to travel and live abroad, dancers are seen as ambassadors for the country, bringing it prestige and building its international reputation.

The country's prolonged isolation has meant that Cuba remains an enigma. Romantic perceptions have been created around the island: Cuba is rum and cigars and the majority of people's understanding of the country goes no further than the iconic print of Che Guevara, an Argentinean-born socialist. Perhaps the growing international presence of Cuban dancers and choreographers will allow a more profound insight into Cuban culture. The dissolution of stereotypes and the development of understanding are essential in encour-

aging Cuba's international inclusion. Performances of Cuban dance in other countries are aiding this change, as Assis Carreiro points out: “It's not just about Salsa; it's about a lot more.” Danza Contemporanea de Cuba's UK tour aims to demonstrate the complexity and unique quality of Cuban dance and challenge these preconceptions.

Bringing dancers over from Cuba is a logistical and bureaucratic nightmare. However, if companies such as Dance Consortium and Danza Contemporanea de Cuba can continue to find ways to work together then who can say what the future may hold. Cuba is in a period of change, with Raul Castro making small but significant changes to the economy and steps towards international reconciliation. Perhaps in time the creativity and passion of Cuban dance will transcend its boundaries and its influence will be felt on a more global scale.

Danza Contemporanea de Cuba tours to eight UK venues with a triple bill that features the UK premiere of *Casi-Casi* by leading Swedish choreographer, Mats Ek, *Folia* by former Dutch ballet choreographer, Jan Linkens, and *Mambo 3XXI* by Danza Contemporanea de Cuba Principal, George Cespédes. Premiering at Newcastle Theatre Royal on 23 February and concluding at Sadler's Wells on 20 March, visit the Dance Consortium website at www.worldwidedanceuk.com.

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