ART RESEARCH JOURNAL

# The ephemeral and evocative histories of Cuban dance

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**Abstract**
In interview given to Igor Lemos Moreira, the American historian Elizabeth Schwall reflects on the role of Cuban dance in the island's revolutionary context. Specialist in the interface between arts and politics in the Americas, Schwall discusses theoretical-methodological aspects of studying the performing arts in historiography, the different processes that involved the institutionalization of dance by the Cuban revolutionary government and the interconnected histories between exiles and artists who support the revolution. Throughout the interview, carried out remotely in addition to being a fruitful field for art historiography, the study of Cuban dance in the 20th century makes it possible to reflect on the global and intertwined connections between politics, society, art and individuals.

**Keywords**: Dance; Cuban Arts; Revolution; Historiography; Art and Politics.

The Cuban Revolution and its consequences in the present time have stood out as an important field for researchers dedicated to Latin American and Caribbean studies. Over the past few years, we have noticed the emergence of a series of new academics dedicated to the study of Cuba, which has caused a great renewal in the understanding of the revolution as a moment of cultural effervescence and the inauguration of new temporal relations that impacted the entire American continent. One of the main interdisciplinary fields of this study grapples with the arts in the revolutionary context, with special emphasis on cinema, music, and dance.

Elizabeth Schwall is a historian specializing in Latin American and Caribbean studies, with an emphasis on Cuban dance in the 20th century. Dedicated to the hypothesis that art played a fundamental role in political and social life throughout the last century, Schwall recently published her first book, entitled *Dancing with the Revolution: Power, Politics, and Privilege in Cuba* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021), in addition to several articles

about dance in Cuba and abroad. She is currently Assistant Professor in the Department of History (Northern Arizona University) and previously was a fellow at the Center for Ballet and the Arts at New York University (2018) and a postdoctoral fellow in dance studies at Northwestern University (2016-2018).

Digitally conducted by Igor Lemos Moreira (Santa Catarina State University), this interview seeks to address some of Elizabeth Schwall's main questions, conclusions, and contributions to the field of Cuban art.

**Igor Lemos Moreira:** Professor Elizabeth Schwall, could you tell us about your academic trajectory?

**Elizabeth Schwall:** As an undergraduate, I first began looking for a way to combine my passions for dance and political history. My experiences as a dancer informed my historical research. For example, I performed in a reconstruction of Vaslav Nijinsky’s *L'après-midi d'un faune* (1912) and a 1970s solo by Ze’eva Cohen, which both compelled me to think about the histories embedded in dance. Simultaneously, in an undergraduate seminar on intellectuals in Latin America co-taught by historian Jeremy Adelman and literary scholar Arcadio Díaz-Quiñones, I read Fidel Castro’s June 1961 “Words to the Intellectuals” speech, and in it, he mentions the recent achievements of Cuban ballet and modern dance companies. I was intrigued. I could not imagine a US leader mentioning professional dance (much less any artists) in an important address. I realized that Cuba was a powerful case study for examining the role of dance (and the arts more broadly) in political history. This prompted me to begin researching Cuban dance, and I wrote a paper about how and why Fidel Castro and his 1959 Cuban Revolution supported ballet. I then wrote a senior thesis that compared the trajectories of ballet and modern dance in 1960s Cuba.

For my doctoral dissertation, which became the loose foundation for my new book, I examined ballet, modern dance, and folkloric dance in Cuba. Influenced by historians like Alejandro de la Fuente (2001) and Jennifer Lambe (2017), I realized that in order to understand what happened after 1959, I needed to analyze political and dance developments in the preceding decades. So my analysis of dance starts in 1930 and ends in 1990, when things changed considerably in Cuban culture, politics, and economics as a result of the crisis caused by the fall of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the so-called Special Period in Times of Peace in Cuba. Although my questions, arguments, time period, and protagonists shifted or expanded over the years, I remained interested in understanding how politics shaped dance and how dancers intervened in political projects.

**ILM:** Recently you published "*Dancing with the Revolution: Power, Politics, and Privilege in Cuba"*, by UNC Press, where you examine the role of dance in the Cuban revolutionary context. Studies about Cuban cultural policy are quite extensive, especially related to music, cinema and literature, but your book analyzes an artistic expression that is not commonly discussed. Could you tell us about the role of dance in the establishment of the revolution? How did it differ from what the government was trying to build in other sectors, such in the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos?

**ES:** I am heavily indebted to excellent studies of other art forms like music, film, theater, and literature (for instance, Moore 2006; Guerra 2012; Mirabal and Velazco 2013; Serra 2007), which inspired me to include dance in conversations about the Revolution. Like other artistic productions, dance became a means for projecting certain images of Cuba and the Revolution to international audiences.

Ballet, modern dance, and folkloric dance projected something different about the nation. Ballet, which I argue became an expression of whiteness and elite culture in Cuba both before and after 1959, projected the often-fraught ideas of enlightenment, elegance, and education. As members of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba rivaled historic and contemporary ballet centers like France, Russia, and New York, Cuban commentators saw ballet as an antidote to historic underdevelopment. Moreover, as all Cubans had greater access to ballet performances, which were cheap or free (or found themselves forced to attend ballet demonstrations at factories, schools, and parks), the once elite pastime became a national patrimony and therefore ostensibly evidenced the democratization of the arts in revolutionary Cuba. Modern dance, as the name implies, articulated modernity and avant-garde innovation through a politicized aesthetic. Modern dancers prioritized revolutionary antiracism in particular and created a national style that reconfigured foreign (and implicitly white) modern dance techniques by integrating elements of Afro-Cuban culture. The first professional modern dance company (today known as Danza Contemporánea de Cuba) founded in 1959 by Cuban choreographer Ramiro Guerra became the first professional dance company on the island with members of different races. Guerra carefully chose the same number of what he deemed to be white, *mulato*, and black dancers, who then performed works that dramatized racial integration. Finally, folkloric dance projected populist discourses of the Revolution as companies like the Havana-based Conjunto Folklórico Nacional, founded in 1962, staged Afro-Cuban popular and ritual dances. In the early years, most folkloric company members came from the working class and were of African descent. The Cuban government exported the company to show off the supposed eradication of racial and class prejudices as lower class Afro-Cubans represented the nation on the world stage.

Even as dancers contributed to the Revolution's international profile, they also troubled revolutionary ideals especially about gender and sexuality. In revolutionary Cuba, like other places in the world, people presumed dance (and especially ballet) was a feminine art and that male dancers risked effeminacy and homosexuality. However, while the government incarcerated notable writers, musicians, and filmmakers who were accused of homosexuality, dancers kept working at best or were sidelined at worst. This inspires questions like why did the government allow the Ballet Nacional de Cuba to tour annually despite high-profile defections, often by presumably gay men? Why did the government not shut down the modern dance company after the 1971 censorship of a provocative work that bureaucrats called pornographic? Why did the government not defund the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional after foundational figures acknowledged or were accused of having same-sex relationships? Although answers to these questions can be complex and elusive, existing archival evidence provides some possible explanations. For instance, based on internal memos, I discovered that dance leaders with connections, like Alicia Alonso (the famed ballerina and revolutionary supporter) or Lorna Burdsall (an important modern dancer and wife of revolutionary notable Manuel Piñeiro), used their privileges to protect fellow dancers and promote their dance causes. Equally, documents suggest that as dancers won international profiles, bureaucrats saw the benefits outweighing the risks in allowing dancers to continue wowing foreign observers. Regardless, dancers enjoyed unique degrees of control over their careers and art, despite the menace of revolutionary homophobia.

Although the government recruited dancers, like filmmakers, musicians, actors, and writers, to contribute to the revolutionary project and although dancers worked in nationalized institutions, dance remained a realm with relatively less oversight compared to other art forms. The government seemed to have trouble fully understanding the ephemeral, nonverbal dance, and so bureaucrats delegated the day-to-day operations and content creation to experts. Additionally, dance may have seemed less threatening or potentially subversive than film or fiction due to its lack of fixity and metaphoric indirectness. The political content of dance productions ranged from vibrant support for the Revolution to unintentional divergences, especially from social orthodoxies, as dancers staged ambiguous meditations on racial justice or on same-sex relationships. So, in sum, there was a lot that dancers shared with other artists in terms of contributing to revolutionary projects, but I found that dancers also arguably differed from counterparts in other media as they seemed to enjoy relatively more power over their bodies and careers.

**ILM:** Dance, like music, is an ephemeral art that depends on the relationship with the public and that can only be analyzed when we have some form of record. In your research, you try to circumvent this process, using government documents, letters, press, performance

programs, films, costume sketches and photography. What is the main challenge in dealing with the ephemeral nature of these artistic practices in the academic research?

**ES:** Although undoubtedly a challenge, analyzing dances from the past provides a unique opportunity to reflect on history more broadly. A dance movement, like any historical event, disappears upon realization. Textual and visual records provide clues about the dynamics, participants, sounds, and feelings of past performances. Take for instance government memos about costumes, letters written by a choreographer about the challenges of mounting a new work, press about a powerful duet, or performance programs with details about the meaning and goal of a particular performance. Each of these textual traces provides invaluable insights about long gone movements. In addition, I am fortunate in that there are costume sketches, photographs, or films of several performances that I study from the recent past. With these visual sources, I pay close attention to choreographic details—how bodies move in space and how they relate to each other—and try to examine what these kinesthetic statements reveal about their historical context. I believe historians with no interest in performance can learn from this dance approach to history. When scholars study women marching in a protest or workers toiling in a factory, for instance, they might pause to look for details on political and social choreographies to gain new insights about historical actions and consequences.

All that said, there are inevitably performances that I wish I could know more about or even see. It can be difficult to tease out what a choreographer intended and what audiences understood from nonverbal, metaphorical dances. For instance, Ramiro Guerra has written extensively about his choreography, but I can never fully grasp the theatrical scope, dramatic content, political intentions, and visual impact of canonical pieces like *Orfeo Antillano* (1964) without video footage and perhaps a journal wherein Guerra detailed his creative process. Even if such such invaluable materials surfaced, I would still wonder about the gasps, applause, silent regard, and hushed comments from audiences during performances in the 1960s. In short, dances of the past, much like the thoughts and actions of any historical figure, remain shrouded in some mystery. Culling meaning from these elusive entities, a task that can be frustrating or impossible at times, motivates rather than deters me.

**ILM:** Your research shows that despite an image of a "unifying" government of the arts, dance performance in Cuba in the revolutionary context was quite diverse, involving genres such as ballet, modern dance and folkloric dance. In addition, Cuban dancers and choreographers interacted with artists from other places. Could you talk about this interaction between different genres and nationalities in Cuban dance?

**ES:** As you point out, I compare different dance genres and how cultural bureaucrats and political leaders treated them differently. Official documents like memos and budgets, as well as more symbolic gestures like fully funded international tours or high profile audience members show disparate levels of state backing. Ultimately, ballet, which represented whiteness and elite taste in Cuban imaginaries, enjoyed the most support, while modern and folkloric dance, which had more diverse dancers and drew heavily upon Afro-Cuban popular culture, had more ambivalent relationships with the state. This reality reveals that revolutionary discourses about class and racial equality had limitations in practice.

There are many examples of balletic privilege. For instance, Fidel Castro personally visited ballet leader Fernando Alonso to offer a considerable subsidy, which became officially protected by law in 1960. Ballet dancers performed the most abroad, which brought sizable material benefits in the form of honorariums and per diems in hard currency. Castro also often attended ballet performances, especially with distinguished international guests. Evidence of balletic power even manifested in 2016, when US president Barack Obama visited Cuba. He delivered his historic televised speech to the Cuban people in the Gran Teatro Alicia Alonso, met Alonso that day, and Alonso listened to the address while seated a few seats away from Cuban president Raúl Castro. No other dance leader, as far as I could tell, met Obama or so prominently attended his address. Meanwhile, modern dance had support, but less than ballet. For instance, even though Castro lauded modern dancers in his 1961 "Words to the Intellectuals" speech, cultural bureaucrats denied modern dancers an important international performance opportunity in 1964 and censored them in 1971. Castro only saw a modern dance performance for the first time in the early 1970s. Folkloric dance had the least support in the decades after 1959. There was no formal government subsidy for the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional until after the company's extremely successful premiere in 1963. Although the company performed abroad in 1964, the next tour was not until 1970. Official government documents reveal racial prejudice factored into this less wholehearted support of the company, which had a majority of black dancers and performed mostly Afro-Cuban popular culture on stage. Salary differences between dancers of the different genres absolutely confirm that hierarchies existed in socialist Cuba.

Even though much of my research focuses on genre divides, it is important to note that these constructed lines were actually rather fluid and porous as dancers, choreographers, and teachers worked in different genres throughout their careers. For instance, modern dancers took (and still take) ballet and folkloric dance classes as part of their training. Ileana Farrés, who began her career as a modern dancer, eventually joined the Ballet Nacional de Cuba and became a notable ballet teacher. Modern dancer Santiago Alfonso began choreographing for the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional in the 1960s; and Ramiro Guerra did the same in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Founding modern dancer Alberto Méndez became a notable ballet

choreographer. Ballet choreographer Alberto Alonso formed the Conjunto Experimental de Danza de la Habana, which sought to mix ballet, modern dance, folkloric dance, and popular dance in an eclectic repertory. Víctor Cuéllar started his career working with Alberto Alonso and ended up as a notable modern dancer and choreographer. So even though class and racial ideologies fed into very real material differences between the genres, dance institutions and professionals interacted regularly across these constructed lines.

As for dancers of different national backgrounds, the Soviet Union became a politically expedient dance partner as Cuba established political and trade relationships with the fellow communist country. Soviet ballet dancers traveled to Cuba in the 1960s to fill a gap left by US ballet dancers who had collaborated with the Alonsos in the late 1940s and 1950s. In particular, Cuba lacked homegrown male dancers immediately after 1959, so Soviet dancers like Azari Plisetski stepped in to partner Alicia Alonso and to help train a new generation of male ballet dancers. Additionally, Cubans invited Soviet technocrats to advise them on developing a nationwide ballet training system in the 1960s. However, in the 1970s, Soviet advising slowed. Plisetski, for instance, left Cuba in 1973. By that time, the first generation of Cuban dancers trained after the Revolution had reached maturity and had entered the Ballet Nacional de Cuba. Jorge Esquivel became the first Cuban male to partner Alicia. Although ballet connections between Cuba and the Soviet Union continued beyond that year, they were particularly intense in the 1960s through the early 1970s (Schwall 2018).

Ballet dancers were not alone in collaborating with foreign colleagues; modern and folkloric dancers for instance worked with counterparts from Mexico. Mexican modern dancers Waldeen, Elena Noriega, Manuel Hiram, and Rodolfo Reyes contributed to building numerous Cuban dance institutions. Waldeen spent the shortest amount of time in Cuba, though she had a high impact position as the first director of the department of modern dance at the Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA). Noriega and Hiram spent years in the 1960s teaching and choreographing for the Conjunto Nacional de Danza Moderna (today Danza Contemporánea de Cuba). Drawing on their experiences in Mexico, Noriega and Hiram supported their Cuban colleagues as they systematized a new, uniquely Cuban technique. Rodolfo Reyes also worked briefly with modern dancers, but most notably, he cofounded the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional with Cuban folkloricist Rogelio Martínez Furé. Like with the Soviets, there were political affinities that facilitated collaborations between Cubans and Mexicans. The Mexican dancers who ended up in Cuba had leftist leanings and were eager to build new dance institutions on the island. Furthermore, Mexico had its own revolution (1910-20) and postrevolutionary cultural project, which gave Mexican dancers a repertoire of political discourse and choreographic priorities to draw upon while in Cuba (Schwall 2017).

Cubans not only worked with politically expedient Soviet and Mexican dancers, but also US dancers, especially Lorna Burdsall and Elfriede ("Elfrida") Mahler, but also Morris

Donaldson, Muriel Manings, and Alma Guillermoprieto among others over the decades. The US expats, fondly known as Lorna and Elfrida, lived decades in Cuba and became foundational figures in modern dance. Ramiro Guerra chose Lorna to dance with his new modern dance company during an initial 1959 audition, and she quickly began teaching and choreographing for the company as well. She also ended up directing the company and advocating on its behalf through the early 1970s. She also played an important role in shaping dance pedagogy as a teacher and national adviser on curriculum, and in 1981, she formed Así Somos, the first small experimental dance theater company in Cuba (Burdsall 2001). Elfrida also danced briefly in Guerra's modern dance company, directed the modern dance department of ENA after Waldeen, taught and developed curriculum for the *aficionados* ("amateurs") movement, and developed modern dance instruction and a professional company in Guantánamo. Donaldson choreographed several works for the Conjunto Nacional de Danza Moderna in 1969. Manings was a guest teacher in 1970 and 1984, and the Mexican-born Guillermoprieto also guest taught in 1970 (Guillermoprieto 2018). Even though Burdsall, Mahler, Donaldson, and Manings were born in the imperialistic United States, Burdsall married a key revolutionary; Mahler was a devoted communist; Donaldson was an African American choreographer who decried US racism; and, Manings had leftist leanings and revolutionary sympathies. Thus, their presence in Cuba made political sense. They all contributed to modern dance developments over the decades.

Despite the many notable contributions of these foreign collaborators, nationalism kept Cubans front and center. Cubans describe Plisetski, for instance, learning as much from Cubans as they did from him, and they maintain that the Cuban school of ballet is decidedly different from the Soviet school (Schwall 2018, 287-88). Rodolfo Reyes had a falling out with his Cuban collaborators in the late 1960s (Schwall 2017). Lorna Burdsall (2001) had to promote and protect her legacy as she was somewhat sidelined in Cuban scholarship about national modern dance developments. Therefore, foreign collaborators supported but did not define Cuban dance developments.

It is worth mentioning that those enumerated above are just a few examples of international collaborators. For instance, Puerto Rican ballet dancers like Silvia Marichal, Otto Bravo, and José Parés contributed to Cuban ballet developments as well. Chilean Patricio Bunster and Uruguayan Teresa Trujillo choreographed for Cuban ballet and modern dancers, respectively. Cubans also worked with foreigners abroad, such as when Alberto Alonso developed *Carmen* in the Soviet Union with ballerina Maya Plisetskaya or when Alicia staged her version of *Giselle* in Paris in 1972. In other words, there are many other stories to tell about Cuban dancers and their international collaborations.

**ILM:** In your research you have analyzed not only dance in Cuba, but also Cuban dancers who have worked internationally. Some, such as Alberto Alonso, decided to go into exile, mostly in the United States. How did these processes happen, what was the main motivation for exile and what narratives about the revolution did they elaborate when they no longer lived in the country?

**ES:** Cuban dancers have been and remain very mobile. As they perform, teach, and choreograph abroad, they develop connections that can help if they decide to leave Cuba. Each person leaves for different reasons, and often, a single person might leave for a combination of political, economic, familial, or professional reasons. Regardless, international connections facilitate migration and careers abroad.

An early and dramatic example of dancers defecting came in 1966, when ten male ballet dancers sought asylum while performing in Paris. According to the US press, the dancers avoided talking about political ideologies and instead called for "cultural" asylum as they fled the persecution of non-conformity in Cuba (Kenyon 1966). This non-conformity could be in the form of politics, clothing, or personal relationships especially homosexual liaisons. The all-male ballet defectors likely at least in part fled the accelerated persecution of homosexuals in Cuba in the late 1960s (Guerra 2012). However, as the press release indicated, they did not necessarily declare anti-communist political reasons for their asylum, but instead so-called cultural ones.

As another example, choreographer Alberto Alonso went into exile with his wife Sonia Calero and changed how he narrated his relationship with the Cuban government. The process started in 1993, when Alonso and Calero discovered that their son had fled by raft while they were in Mexico working. They decided to follow their son into exile and ended up working at Santa Fe Community College in Gainesville, Florida. Once in the United States, Alonso narrated a different relationship to the Revolution than he had over his decades in Cuba. Although he had created works with revolutionary sentiments, such as *Conjugación* (1970) about Che Guevara, in the 1990s and 2000s he claimed to have harbored resentments with the system and to have embedded anti-government resistance in some of his choreography. He explained to an audience in Florida that by the late-1960s he was upset about limits on expression and that his *Carmen* (1967) metaphorically critiqued the Castro regime.[1] Indeed, others have confirmed that Alonso staged daring and controversial work such as *Diógenes ante el tonel* (1971), which the Cuban government effectively censored (Martínez 2019).

However, Alonso did not want a resistant narrative to define his legacy. Ricardo Acosta made a documentary about his life, which was originally titled, *Dancing in Freedom's Shoes*.

[1] Alberto Alonso, untitled speech notes, personal archives of Sonia Calero, Miami, Florida.

Promotional material described the film following "an amazing saga of triumph over personal, artistic and political adversity."[2] Alonso disliked the name and framing, and the film was renamed *Dance of my Heart*. This less combative title highlighted a focus on the love story between Alonso and Calero rather than their politics (Calero 2013). Ultimately, even though Alonso spoke more freely about his political dissidence once living in exile, his exit from Cuba was less about ideology and more about personal, familial developments (his son fleeing by raft) and opportunity (he and Sonia in Mexico), which dovetailed with mounting political and professional frustrations.

Many other Cuban dancers started leaving in the 1990s during the economic and political crisis caused by the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba's most important trading partner. During the so-called Special Period, many Cuban dancers tapped into their international networks to develop their careers elsewhere.[3] Modern dance choreographer Marianela Boán did graduate work in the United States, but ended up getting a job building and directing a company in the Dominican Republic. Several Cuban contemporary dancers have ended up in Chicago since the early 2000s with former Danza Contemporánea de Cuba company members Victor Alexander Ramírez and Maray Gutiérrez blazing a trail out of happenstance. That is, they initially went to Chicago because Gutiérrez had family there, and they ended up finding exciting opportunities to continue dancing, teaching, and choreographing in the city. In subsequent years, other Cuban contemporary dancers followed their path to Chicago in hopes of similarly finding new artistic horizons and opportunities. Even though politics sometimes comes up in the oral histories of several young Cuban dancers currently in Chicago, perhaps as an offhand joke about the system or Fidel Castro, most of the time politics remains completely or almost entirely out of their narratives.

In summary, decisions to leave are complex and idiosyncratic. Understandings about exile, migration, and what was left behind also shift over time. It is important to honor these nuances, complexities, and changes.

**ILM:** Finally, I believe, as a researcher on Cuba and global Cubanness, that one of the main challenges is to deal with the political dimension and the dichotomous stereotypes that circulate about the Cuban Revolution. You are part of a new generation of historians who have acted precisely as a critic of this current, demonstrating the complexity and contradictions that characterize Cuba. Can you tell us about this process?

**ES:** The Revolution recruited Cuban artists to contribute to building a new society, and many eagerly joined revolutionary campaigns. Some had leftist convictions and believed in

[2] Original title and promotional materials from personal archives of Sonia Calero, Miami, Florida.
[3] See, for instance, discussion of Narciso Medina and others in John 2012.

socialist futures. Others were less politically motivated, but they accurately saw unprecedented opportunities to build institutions, careers, and audiences. Still others, especially those born in the 1960s and beyond, simply entered a career with little thought about the larger social or political implications of that choice. Trying to honor the multiplicity of motivations that compel Cuban artists across time remains the largest challenge. You are correct to note that it is easy and common to caricature Cuban artists as revolutionaries or counterrevolutionaries, handmaidens to the state or covert dissidents. In most cases, they were and are neither. They are artists who happen to operate in a highly politicized context. To try to represent Cuban dancers more holistically, I focus on their social histories, thinking about their salaries and access to food, for instance. I also analyze how along with ideology, social identities like gender, race, and sexual orientation shaped their realities. Examining their achievements, frustrations, and everyday efforts to get by presents another layer of historical experience often lost behind the elite politicking of the regime.

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