

L.A. Latino

Dance Cuba: Dreams of Flight

(Docu -- U.S.-Cuba)

By ROBERT KOEHLER



The Washington Ballet performs in Cuba in documentary 'Dance Cuba,' screened at the Los Angeles Latino fest.

An Illume Prods. presentation in cooperation with bic Prods. . (International sales: Emerging Pictures, New York.) Produced by Cynthia Newport. Managing producer, Steve Bennett. Directed by Cynthia Newport, Barbara Kopple, Boris Ivan Crespo.

With: Carlos Acosta, Alicia Alonso, Fernando Alonso, Septime Webre , Laura Urgelles, Lorna Feijoo , Pedro Acosta, Trey McIntyre, Angela Grau, Miguel Cabrera, Cortney Palomo , Victor Gil, Silvia Rodriguez, Jonah Gonzalez, Donald Saddler.

(English, Spanish dialogue)

While nimbly avoiding stepping on any political toes, "Dance Cuba: Dreams of Flight" elegantly documents the emotional and artistic ties between Cuban and American dancers and dance companies, even as it records the seemingly unbridgeable

gap between the two nations. Pic illustrates this paradox as well as any non-fiction work to date, while also serving as an ideal docu to break down the resistance some may feel toward watching ballet. This brilliantly lensed terpsichorean adventure deserves plenty of fest invites and significant distrib interest, finishing with a graceful pirouette into vid.

Cultural exchange efforts between Cuba and the U.S. remain few and far between. Producer and co-director Cynthia Newport's decision to record the first time that a U.S. dance company performed on a Cuban stage in the 40 years (since the Revolution) is finally about larger topics -- the power of dance, the power of families and the paradoxes of talent in a totalitarian world.

Newport's extensive and well-chosen production team includes vet documaker Barbara Kopple (who handled Stateside lensing, and then later shifted south to the island) and Cuban indie filmmaker Boris Ivan Crespo (covering Cuba). Kopple immediately makes her presence felt in her shooting of the Washington Ballet, led by the forward-thinking artistic director, Septime Webre.

Webre, whose Cuban American heritage eventually looms large in the film, explains directly to the lens about the early preparation for the company's guest performance at the October 2000 Havana dance fest: Besides an obligatory Afro-Cuban number, there's a soulful piece set to songs by Etta James, and a daring male-male *das de deux* choreographed by rising dance world star Trey McIntyre. Webre is concerned that a macho society like Cuba's might bristle at the sight of two men playing a love dance on stage.

Meanwhile, superstar dancer Carlos Acosta returns for a visit to his homeland from his constant international touring and his London base, where he's a lead dancer with the Royal Ballet. "Dance Cuba" is as interested in the personal side of its profiled artists as their careers, so Acosta is first seen with his family and his always-proud father, Pedro. Acosta's narration of his extremely troubled upbringing (mother hit by a stroke, Pedro in prison) makes his rise to fame sound miraculous.

A third narrative thread belongs to Cuba's omnipotent dance matriarch, Alicia Alonso, who made the groundbreaking call to invite Webre's company to perform in Cuba. (Newport and company never get into what must have been difficult negotiations to permit the troupe's travel, and only glance at a wave of anti-Castro protests directed at the Washington Ballet.) Alonso's exquisite saga -- from stardom in New York to struggles with blindness -- brings the recurring theme of self-sacrifice to an emotional climax. For Cuba, the drain of talent from a system (created by Alonso and her brilliant ex-husband Fernando) that has trained so many superb dancers has been painful. Only occasionally meandering, the film assembles these various pieces into an unexpectedly moving whole, thanks to the careful editing team of Deborah Dickson and Richard Hankin. Once in a while, however, there's a hint that the filmmakers are pulling back from full frankness; absence of not one criticism of McIntyre's male dance from Havana auds seems such an example.

But, the sheer beauty of "Dance Cuba," and its energetic visual celebration of dance, from classical ballet to contemporary fusion styles, tends to trump any quibbles. HD lensing is beyond crisp, reaching nearly state-of-the-art image resolution, and socko color schemes. Cuban jazz pianist Chucho Valdes' supporting music brings out his tender side.

Camera (color, 24p high-def video), Tom Hurwitz, Don Lenzer, Roberto Chile; editors, Deborah Dickson, Richard Hankin; music, Chucho Valdes; sound designer, Ira Spiegel. Reviewed at the Fairfax Theatre, Los Angeles, July 29, 2004. (In Los Angeles Latino Film Festival; also in Miami Film Festival.) Running time: 105 MIN.

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