

*Dancing In Freedom's Shoes:
The Alberto Alonso Story*

Synopsis

By Stephen Robitaille

Outside the famous Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow a crowd is anxiously queuing up for a historic performance. It is the 80th birthday jubilee of Maya Plisetskaya, one of the most famous prima ballerinas ever to take the stage.

Tonight, Nov. 18, 2005 is the "re-premiere" of choreographer Alberto Alonso's acclaimed work, *Carmen*, a ballet he created expressly for Plisetskaya in 1967 and that was immediately stripped of its sensuous pas de deux after its first provocative performance.

Indeed, the tremors this ballet set in motion in Russia, and back home in Alonso's native Cuba, were so profound that Maya's decision to choose this as one of three works performed for her jubilee has had dance critics, photographers, and the paparazzi hovering around the rehearsals all week. The atmosphere leading to this evening's curtain is electric, and tomorrow images of the event will beam around the world from CNN to "Good Morning America." Sitting in the front row is Alonso and his wife, Cuban dancer Sonia Calero. This is their night.

Also in attendance this evening is the one film company permitted to shoot the historic performance for the feature-length documentary, *Dancing In Freedom's Shoes: The Alberto Alonso Story*.

For several frenzied and frigid Moscow months in 1967, Alonso and his Russian colleagues worked feverishly on their new ballet. Then would come the censoring by the Russian Minister of Culture, Back in Cuba, Raul Castro's prophetic opening night warning that the Cuban government would not look kindly on the ballet's thinly veiled political allegory resulted in Alberto and Sonia being "put on the shelf," their creative lives hamstrung. But the Alonsos were determined to explore their vision of a Cuban style in both classical and popular dance forms. They would go on to become great innovators in Cuban television, nightclubs and film, creating such masterworks as "El Solar," "El Guije," "Rumba," and "Romeo and Juliet."

Moments before the lights dim in Moscow, a figure rises in the royal box. It is Maya, accompanied by her husband, the famous Russian composer Rodion Schedrin, whose score for Alonso's *Carmen* married themes from the famous Bizet opera score to the percussive Latin elements that seem inseparable now from the core of the ballet's brilliant choreography.

Maya is greeting the audience with sinuous flutterings of her famous *Swan Lake* arms. The audience is standing, clapping, and as she gestures to the crowd, their din rises in response. Maya and her family suffered years of persecution under the Stalin regime, resulting in her banishment from international travel with the Bolshoi company for much of

her reign as the company's prima ballerina. She extends her arms and gazes at Alberto and Sonia Alonso. She knows this moment marks a victory of art over politics.

In his film interview following the historic *Carmen* "re-premiere," Alonso likens the event to a dream, "a good dream, after so many bad dreams." Indeed, as *Dancing In Freedom's Shoes* will reveal, the Alonso family's story has a dream-like quality.

Alberto launched his career with star performances in works such as "Petruska" with the famous Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. During the war years, he would dance in America with such luminaries as Fred Astaire and Jerome Robbins. Sonia would become one of Cuba's favorite folkloric dancers in nightclubs and on Cuban television. Archival images feature Sonia with Bob Hope, Cantinflas and with the San Souci nightclub troupe on the Steve Allen Show.

Alberto and his brother, the noted Cuban ballet teacher, Fernando Alonso, and his sister-in-law, Alicia Alonso, a world-renowned ballet star, have all played a pivotal role in the history of Cuban ballet. The influence of Alberto and Sonia's unique Cuban style on the history of world ballet, as witnessed most profoundly in *Carmen*, is highlighted in the documentary. As the film depicts, the couple's early years were tremendously successful.

Dancing In Freedom's Shoes dramatically documents, a world of artistic passion and political repression, and the desire for freedom -- all qualities at the core of Alonso's *Carmen* and characteristic of Alberto and Sonia's exhilarating journey from early stardom and international fame to post-Castro indignities and constraints. Life would reach its lowest point when, like so many of their fellow Cubans, they would endure the dread of their child's possible imprisonment and his heroic escape by raft to Florida in 1993.

Though they remained productive during the Castro years, their son's defection inspired the Alonso's to seek political asylum and the opportunity for personal and artistic freedom in the United States.

In the audience of the historic *Carmen* performance is Alora Haynes, a central player in Alberto and Sonia's move to the United States. Haynes, director of the dance program at Santa Fe Community College in Gainesville, Fla., studied the Bolshoi Ballet in graduate school. She discovered that Alonso was the only non-Russian ever commissioned to produce a work for the Bolshoi. When word reached Haynes that Alberto and Sonia needed asylum, she convinced Santa Fe to hire them both.

The film shows Sonia, now in her 70's, teaching salsa, and Alberto, now in his late 80s, choreographing new works for his young and appreciative dancers while juggling the demands of teaching and directing his older, famous works on stages from Japan to Indianapolis to Moscow.

Framed by this historic night at the Boshoi, *Dancing In Freedom's Shoes* is a panoramic story of two artists whose enduring love for their country and their art triumphed over turmoil and tragedy. Devoted to the concept that art should be of and for the people regardless of race or privilege and independent of political ideology, they contacted and influenced the lives of many noted artists appearing in this film such as Cuban saxophonist

Paquito D’Rivera, Miami City Ballet Artistic Director Edward Villella, and recently defected Cuban dancer Rolando Sarabia, to name a few.

In collaboration with Artistic Director Robert de Warren of the Sarasota Ballet, Alonso restages the Carmen pas de deux and closing bullfight scene. During the filming, deWarren, his ballet master, Pavel Fomin, and their dancers share personal accounts of political and artistic repression, and their connection with the ballet’s history and message.

The film was shot on location in New York, Munich, Moscow, Miami, Sarasota and Gainesville. A benefit screening of *Dancing In Freedom’s Shoes* will be held Sept. 16, in Gainesville at the Curtis M. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts.

For more information about the film, contact Stephen Robitaille at (352) 395- 5304, Alora Haynes, (352) 395-5296 or Daphne Stacey, (353) 376-2810.

Sources:

Daphne Stacey, documentary producer – (352) 376-2810

Alora Haynes, Santa Fe Community College dance director, executive producer
(352) 395-5296

Julie Garrett, SFCC communications specialist – (352) 395-5430

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Revolutionary dancer and choreographer, 88, ready for his next role: movie star

GAINESVILLE, FL– Alberto Alonso doesn't believe in retirement – not after everything the 88-year-old master choreographer has endured for his art.

The Cuban-born Alonso – famous for choreographing the sultry version of *Carmen* that debuted at Russia's Bolshoi Theatre in 1967, only to be banned by the government – is the subject of an upcoming documentary film, "Dancing in Freedom's Shoes." His is the story of astounding creativity in the face of political oppression, when speaking his mind was tantamount to risking his life.

Rather than resting on his considerable laurels, Alonso may be on the verge of achieving even greater fame when "Dancing in Freedom's Shoes" -- directed by Emmy-winner Stephen Robitaille -- is shown at a benefit screening in Gainesville on Sept. 16. A host of ballet luminaries from around the world are scheduled to attend.

Alonso's life seems tailor-made for the screen. During a stint of schooling in America in the 1930s, the young Alonso took up football. Upon returning to Cuba, where football games were scarce, he enrolled in ballet classes at his mother's arts school to stay in shape. He had natural ability, and when a talent scout from Ballet Russe came calling, Alonso found himself traveling the world with the famed company. He spent time in Los Angeles, where he danced with Fred Astaire, and New York, performing with the company that would become American Ballet Theater. Alonso then returned to Cuba to become the founder of Cuban-style ballet, working on stage as well as in television and the nightclub scene.

But this idyllic time was not to last. As the curtain of political oppression descended over Cuba, Alonso and his wife, noted dancer Sonia Calero, found their artistic expression limited at every turn. They dreamed of escaping Castro's regime, but government policies required that one family member remain in Cuba whenever one of the Alonsos went on tour, preventing defection.

Half a world away, in Moscow, famed prima ballerina Maya Plisetskaya found herself in the same situation, forbidden to tour with the Bolshoi for fear of defection. When she saw one of Alonso's works, *El Solar*, Plisetskaya recognized a kindred spirit and asked Alonso to choreograph *Carmen* for her. One does not say no to Maya Plisetskaya, and so Alonso became – and remains to this day – the first non-Russian ever commissioned to produce a ballet for the Bolshoi.

Although his sensual, politically provocative masterpiece was banned from the Russian stage, it has been performed throughout the world. Sarasota Ballet director Robert de Warren called it “a hymn to freedom.”

Today, Alonso is enjoying artistic freedom as Master Artist in Residence at Santa Fe Community College in Gainesville. While the Alonsos were in Mexico in 1993, their son escaped Cuba on a raft, and the family was reunited in Florida, where SFCC dance director Alora Haynes found employment for Sonia and Alberto. Undaunted by mastering a new language, country and culture, the Alonsos have thrived. Sonia teaches salsa classes, while Alberto enjoys teaching and choreographing new works. In November 2005, Alonso was again called to Moscow to restage *Carmen* as part of Plisetskaya's 80th birthday jubilee, where the legendary ballerina bowed before Alonso.

In the film, Alonso likens the moment to a dream: “A good dream, after so many bad dreams.”

MEDIA ADVISORY

* Further information about the documentary film “Dancing in Freedom's Shoes: The Alberto Alonso Story” is available at www.dancinginfreedomsshoes.com.

* Selected media coverage of Alonso is available at the following URLs:

– *Washington Post*, “Moscow Honors Bolshoi's ‘True Queen’”

www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/11/19/AR2005111900882.html

– *The Gainesville Sun*, “*Carmen*, Cuban-style”

www.gainesville.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051030/DAYBREAK/51029044&SearchID=73235320310323