

# **Importing Ballet to the West**

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## **Introduction**

The globalization of various industries and the outsourcing of jobs are not phenomena unique to the realm of technology. They also appear in the arts, and quite visibly in ballet. Starting with Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in the early decades of the twentieth century, ballet, as this is known today in the West, is largely an imported art. In 1961, Rudolf Nureyev defected from the Soviet Union to dance in the West.<sup>1</sup> Nureyev was followed by a series of dancers, including, most notably, Natalia Makarova and Mikhail Baryshnikov, who defected from the Soviet Union in 1970 and 1974, respectively, and went on to highly successful careers in the West.

This wave of Russians set the bar for style and technique to which people still compare performances. They prompted the organization of schools and companies, and spread the influence of the Bolshoi and Kirov approaches to training from Cuba to Korea. While good ballet schools emerged in those countries, professional opportunities for classical dancers remained limited. The United States and much of western Europe remain the homes of the world's leading ballet companies.

In the past two decades, Russian dancers have been replaced by a new wave of Spanish, Latin, and East Asian dancers. These newcomers are gradually changing the

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<sup>1</sup>Clive Barnes, *Nureyev* (New York: Helene Obolensky Enterprises, 1982.)

face of American ballet, allowing audiences to see an art shape into the demographic changes of the last thirty years.

These changes began with the Immigration Act of 1965, after which the U.S. saw a “vast flow of immigrants, most of them legal but many illegal, from Latin America and Asia.”<sup>2</sup> With changes in the economy, the U.S. found new demands for both high- and low- skill immigrant labor.<sup>3</sup>

Parallel to this immigration phenomenon, American ballet companies are now finding their needs best met by immigrant laborers as well. Quadruple turns have replaced double turns as an industry standard. Multiple beats in a jump mid-air are now expected from all pre-professional male ballet dancers. The minimum skills and quality of expression that companies require result from hours of demanding ballet training per week, hundreds of dollars worth of pointe shoes for women, and the sacrifice of a timely college education.

In countries like Cuba and China, the government provides ballet training, and dance replaces large portions of what middle-class Americans consider a formal education. Specialized dance schools in international cities like Madrid and Seoul offer ballet training that make their students attractive potential company members for top Western ballet companies.

The ballet is changing.

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<sup>2</sup>Michael Barone, “The Newest Americans,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 April 2006, A.16.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

## The Russian Legacy

The ballet dancers who left the USSR during the Cold War were considered to have “betrayed [their] teachers, colleagues, and native land.”<sup>4</sup> Soviet dancers were treated as celebrities in the USSR. They had access to privileges such as cars that they were allowed to own and drive, apartments, dachas, and the chance to travel and to perform abroad. Additionally, Soviet Russia had a low opinion of Western ballet, which was viewed as second-rate and derivative of Russian ballet. It was an insult to the country if a dancer chose to defect to the West.

The segregation of Soviet ballet from the rest of the world allowed the development of a distinct form of ballet that greatly differed from its Western counterparts. Companies such as the Kirov and the Bolshoi nurtured a Soviet style of choreography that featured noticeably large scale movements, space-covering jumps, and virtuosic turns in comparison to Western choreography. When Galina Ulanova performed for the West, she was considered “a flame”<sup>5</sup> with fluid fouettés and pirouettes. Her jetés seemed suspended mid-air, and her movements incorporated emotion. A somewhat less impressive distinction in Ulanova's performance was in how her movements lacked detail and articulation in what could have been mime scenes with small and expressive gestures.

After 1930, moreover, Soviet ballet had altogether lost touch with choreographic developments abroad.

Choreographers took ballet in new directions outside of the USSR. Frederick Ashton and Antony Tudor were British, and George Balanchine, although of Russian

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<sup>4</sup>David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 468.

<sup>5</sup>Caute, 474.

heritage, worked in the United States. Soviet Russia continued to encourage narrative ballets, including those with nationalist themes, over plotless ones. Schools received government support and advanced the technical and virtuosic training of students.

While governmental control of the arts yielded many benefits, it also stifled many dancers, and defectors left for a variety of reasons. Rudolf Nureyev defected while on tour in Paris both for artistic reasons and for fear that his newfound lifestyle had fallen afoul the authorities. “I was to be despatched to Moscow and there be judged. For my 'irresponsible' way of life, as they had called it. For insubordination, non-assimilation, dangerous individualism,” recalls Nureyev about the government's reaction to his choice of friends and the conduct of his social life.<sup>6</sup> Nureyev also spoke about how a male dancer in Russia was taught to be rough and anti-lyrical, but he wanted to explore a more emotional aspect of dance.<sup>7</sup> In the end, he, along with many others, wanted freedom as a person and as a dancer. Russian dancers found freedom in Western companies. Nureyev joined the Royal Ballet. Baryshnikov danced with both the New York City Ballet (NYCB), and American Ballet Theatre (ABT); Makarova danced with with ABT. As a result, in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, in the West ballet was redefined with a Russian accent.

### **Spain's Exports**

Russian accents have now morphed into Spanish accents, and these changes have roots in specific schools worldwide. One of the major contributors to the presence of Spanish dancers in Western ballet companies is Victor Ullate. Ullate joined Maurice Béjart's company in 1965 as a principal dancer. In 1983, he opened Spain's first major

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<sup>6</sup>Caute, 489.

<sup>7</sup>Caute, 487.

ballet school, the “Centro de Danza Victor Ullate,”<sup>8</sup> and five years later, with the support of the Spanish government, he founded Ballet Victor Ullate. At the Ullate school, students began training at the age of eight and studied a range of dance styles, including modern and flamenco.<sup>9</sup> Many students graduated with solid technical and stylistic training, especially in ballet. However, although Ullate graduates were well grounded in ballet, there were few professional opportunities for them in Spain.

According to Angel Corella, an American Ballet Theatre principal dancer and a former Ullate student, during the 1990's there were “only two major dance companies in Spain, and both of them were modern.”<sup>10</sup> If a dancer wanted to pursue a career in classical ballet, he or she had to leave the country. Spanish dancers, and Ullate's students in particular, now dance on the stages of American Ballet Theatre, New York City Ballet, the Royal Ballet, and other major Western ballet companies.

#### *Angel Corella*

Like so many other Spanish dancers, Corella pursued his dream of dancing by leaving home. During his final years in Spain as a teenager, Corella found himself dancing at the back of the corps. Hoping to find greater opportunities elsewhere, in December 1995 he entered the Concours International de Danse de Paris and won the gold medal.<sup>11</sup> Soon after, he was on the fast track to a position as soloist for the American Ballet Theatre.

A major influence on Corella was his coach, Karemia Moreno, a Cuban-trained dancer. In an interview for the documentary *Born to Be Wild*, Corella describes how her

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<sup>8</sup><http://www.victorullateballet.com/>

<sup>9</sup>Valerie Gladstone, “Victor Ullate's Students Take Off,” *Dance Magazine*, September 2004.

<sup>10</sup>Kristin Lewis, “Made in Madrid,” *Pointe*, August/September 2008, 30-32.

<sup>11</sup>[www.abt.org/dancers/detail.asp?Dancer\\_ID=17](http://www.abt.org/dancers/detail.asp?Dancer_ID=17)

training integrated technique with dancing: “she helped me listen to the music so it's not just a turn, but a *musical* turn.”<sup>12</sup> At the same time, he learned to “jump higher” and do “tricks in the air.”<sup>13</sup> From early in his career, Corella has been noted for his virtuosity. One of his first solos with American Ballet Theatre was the Bronze Idol in *La Bayadère*, a solo that demands technical bravura.<sup>14</sup>

Male virtuosity is easy for critics and audience members to notice. Male training in the Cuban school is largely based on the Soviet system, which produced dancers like Nureyev, Baryshnikov, and many others. In fact, Corella's early training had direct Russian roots, since Moreno had attended the Bolshoi Ballet School between 1960 and 1965.<sup>15</sup> During the early years of his career with ABT, newspapers often praised Corella for his leaps and pirouettes but criticized his inexperience, which manifested itself in performances that were considered “unpolished” and “raw,”<sup>16</sup> criticisms addressed to some Russian emigrés decades before. In fact, the careers of successful male dancers such as Corella have evolved in a similar fashion to those of their Russian predecessors, with an initial emphasis on bravura and a later cultivation of dramatic expression.

Many Spanish dancers have followed Corella's path, and today Spanish dancers fill the ranks of well-known companies. In an effort to encourage opportunities for ballet dancers in Spain, Corella established Spain's only classical ballet company, Corella Ballet,<sup>17</sup> which began rehearsals in April 2008 and made its debut three months later. The company receives seventy percent of its funding from the Spanish royal family, and

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<sup>12</sup>*Born to be Wild*, 58 min, Thirteen, 2003, Videocassette.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Kaye, 26.

<sup>15</sup><http://www.angelcorella.org/cvmoreno2.htm>

<sup>16</sup>Anna Kisselgoff, "They Make People Gasp," *New York Times*, 1999 May 14.

<sup>17</sup><http://www.angelcorella.com/compania2.html>

thirty percent from private sources,<sup>18</sup> in contrast to American companies, which receive minimal government funding but substantial support from the private sector. Corella's company is an initial step toward making Spain a classical dance center.

*Lucía Lacarra*

Lucía Lacarra is another Spanish dancer who trained with Ullate. She entered his school when she was fourteen and joined his company a year later. When asked what it was like to train with Ullate, she stated:

We had three-hour classes in the morning plus evening classes. It was tough work with a lot of discipline. He really knew how to see somebody's talent and make that person work for it. I guess that is the reason why he created so many amazing dancers.<sup>19</sup>

Lacarra danced with the Ullate company for three years, performing modern abstract ballets. In 1994 she joined Roland Petit's Ballet National de Marseilles and began to dance more dramatic roles. Three years later, Lacarra joined San Francisco Ballet with her then fiancé Cyril Pierre, and now dances with the Bavarian State Ballet in Munich.<sup>20</sup>

Lacarra's professional journey out of Spain is very different from Corella's. Lacarra did not begin her career with a focus on full-length classical ballets, nor did she enter the professional world through an international competition. On the contrary, the early part of her career centered on performing contemporary works. Lacarra received strong technical coaching from Ullate and coaching in dramatic roles from Petit. In an interview with Octavio Roca published in *Dance Magazine*, Lacarra explains how she

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<sup>18</sup>Lewis, 34.

<sup>19</sup>Kate Lydon, "Lucia Lacarra," [Dance Magazine, February 2007](#).

<sup>20</sup>"Bayerisches Staatsballett: Biography Lucia Lacarra," <[http://www.muenchner-opern-festspiele.de/309-ZG9tPWRvbTMmaWQ9OTczJmw9ZW4--popups~k\\_biographie.html](http://www.muenchner-opern-festspiele.de/309-ZG9tPWRvbTMmaWQ9OTczJmw9ZW4--popups~k_biographie.html)>, 7 November 2008.

had never performed dramatic ballets before joining the Ballet National de Marseilles. It was dancing in works like *Carmen* and *Notre Dame de Paris* that allowed her to explore the dramatic subtleties in movement. She describes how she learned to “interpret [and] to build a character through movement... Sometimes that means making the most not only of steps, but of a small gesture, of a glance, of stillness onstage, of the moments between steps.”<sup>21</sup> These two complementary stages of Lacarra's career allowed her to lay the foundations of a classical ballerina.

Because of Lacarra's diverse training, she easily adapted to the unusually broad repertoire of the San Francisco Ballet, where she performed in ballets as diverse as Jerome Robbins' *The Cage* and *Swan Lake*. Her first performance of *The Cage* impressed both critics and fellow company members. “She learns very, very fast,” said her partner David Palmer. Roca described her performance, “Lacarra's final bursts of violence were also unsettling, dazzling, and gorgeously danced.”<sup>22</sup> Despite the reverse direction of her career—going from modern to classical ballet—Lacarra acquired the technique and endurance to perform full-length classical ballets in addition to works that were stylistically quite different from her former repertoire.

Lacarra's style is fluid and controlled, a noteworthy achievement given the length and flexibility of her body. The DVD production, *Great Dancers of Our Time*, features two performances that illustrate her capabilities. In “Romance” from *Lady of the Camellias*, her smooth pirouettes from a forced arch preparation and high envelopés into passés illustrate the technical strength that she attributes to her training with Ullate. During the “dramatic” parts of the ballet, she languidly walks about the stage with her

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<sup>21</sup>Octavio Roca, “Lucia Lacarra: Spain's Gift to San Francisco,” *Dance Magazine*, February 1999, 70.

<sup>22</sup>Roca, “Lucia Lacarra.”

eyes high and wandering, her arms seeking the embrace of a lover. A sudden wave of nausea interrupts her romantic daydream as she clutches her throat and chest, looking as though she were about to retch. The juxtaposition of ecstatic love and tragic illness extends through the pas de deux with Cyril Pierre. Lacarra's performance in the *Swan Lake* pas de deux possessed similar sinuous qualities, full range of extension in her limbs, and ease in lifts as in "Romance."<sup>23</sup>

Lacarra has been able to seek a full range of professional opportunities outside her home country with both classical and contemporary ballet companies. The contemporary influence allows her to dance a classical role differently from other ballerinas, and her dramatic roles have taught her how to interpret even the most abstract works. The combination has made Lacarra into one of the most accomplished Spanish ballerinas of the decade.

### **Cuban Training**

In 1959 Fidel Castro recruited Alicia and Fernando Alonso to start a national ballet company in Cuba. An established school and company would help the country rebuild its identity and its culture; the government, to this day, continues to cover all expenses of both the company, eventually named the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, and its affiliated school. This school has been an important factor contributing to the diversification of Western companies. According to Erika Kinetz in *The New York Times*, "training, especially Cuban training has been a key driver of the latinization of ballet."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>*Great Dancers of Our Time*, 78 min., TDK/EuroArts, 2005, DVD.

<sup>24</sup>Erika Kinetz, "The New Soaring Force in American Ballet: Hispanics," *The New York Times*, 20 September 2005, E7.

Cuba's Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical established a company and school in 1931. After World War II, Alicia Alonso, her husband, Fernando, along with Fernando's brother, Alberto Alonso, started the Ballet Alicia Alonso, which became the Ballet Nacional de Cuba after the revolution. In 1960, the Cuban government passed a law ensuring that the Ballet Nacional would be amply funded, so that it could share what was once an elite practice with the general Cuban public.<sup>25</sup>

*Alicia Alonso*

Alicia Alonso began her dance studies at the Sociedad Pro-Arte's Escuela de Ballet in 1931,<sup>26</sup> but left Cuba with Fernando Alonso to continue her studies in New York City. She built her reputation as a prima ballerina with Ballet Theatre (now American Ballet Theatre), returning to Cuba in 1947 as an international ballet star and starting Cuba's first professional company, Ballet Alicia Alonso.<sup>27</sup> Alonso left Cuba in 1956, refusing to dance there during the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. In the interim between her departure and return to Cuba, in 1959, Alonso danced both in the United States and in the USSR, training with the Bolshoi and Kirov companies.<sup>28</sup>

After Batista's overthrow and at Castro's behest, the Alonsos returned to Cuba. To recruit students for their new school, the Alonsos traveled to rural areas in search of boys from less fortunate socioeconomic backgrounds. The Alonsos wanted to create a company of dancers free of prerevolutionary stereotypes related to class, race, and gender. During the 1960's, boys from upper-class families did not study ballet, so many

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<sup>25</sup>Deirdre Brill, "La Escuela Cubana: Dance Education and Performance in Revolutionary Cuba," Diss. University of Pennsylvania, 2007, 82.

<sup>26</sup>*Ballet Nacional de Cuba* : <<http://www.balletcuba.cult.cu/Biografias/biografias.html>>, 7 November 2008.

<sup>27</sup>Brill, 183.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 185.

came from orphanages.<sup>29</sup> Poor and dark-skinned students trained together to create uniform lines and simultaneous movements within the corps. The homogenous training overrode the superficial physical differences of race. This multiracialism surprised foreign audiences during the company's early tours.<sup>30</sup> Audiences, when planning to see a “white” ballet, such as *Giselle*, assumed they would be seeing white dancers.

Along with recruiting students from all locales and family backgrounds, the Alonsos also made efforts to integrate the heritage of Afro-Cuban music and movement with ballet. Choreographers, like Victor Cuéllar and Ramiro Guerra, created works that were based on native Yoruban myths and African movements and music. According to historian Deirdre Brill, “the Alonsos wanted to create a Cuban dance style that included a more masculine role for men and reflected Cuba's Spanish and African background.”<sup>31</sup> Cuéllar's *Panorama de la Danza* illustrates Cuba's cultural transformation from Spanish colonialism to the years of the revolution. Guerra's *Medea y Los Negros* reflected the hardships and perseverance of Caribbean women.<sup>32</sup> Choreographers also modified the style of the pas de deux so that the male and female roles became, in Brill's words, “a reflection of the strong expressions of masculinity and femininity.”<sup>33</sup> The reassertion of masculinity was intended to counter the association of ballet with effeminacy, which made ballet unattractive to upper-class males.

Azari Plisetski, former partner of Alicia Alonso and member of the Bolshoi Ballet, has been, according to critic Jennifer Dunning, a large part of “rejuvenating Cuban

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<sup>29</sup>Jennifer Dunning, “Learning Nuances of Ballet From a Master of Fusion,” *The New York Times*, 14 September 2006, E2.

<sup>30</sup>Brill, 99-101.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 112.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 117.

ballet in the 1960's and bringing Cuban male dancers to the fore internationally.”<sup>34</sup>

Plisetski currently teaches at Maurice Béjart's school in Switzerland, but in the 1960's, he taught the men's class at the Ballet Nacional school. Plisetski brought codified male training from the Bolshoi to Cuba. Cuban male dancers were trained to have strong jumps, turns, and partnering skills. Plisetski's specialization in male training is also evident in his choreography. The Ballet Nacional de Cuba's 1973 performance of Plisetski's work, *Canto Vital*, was described as “a contemporary showcase for four exciting male dancers in briefs.”<sup>35</sup>

Ballet Nacional's repertoire ranged from nineteenth-century ballets such as *Giselle*, *Coppélia*, and *Swan Lake*, to contemporary works, such as those by Cuéllar and Guerra.<sup>36</sup> The Ballet Nacional de Cuba school first won international recognition in 1964 at the Varna Competition in Bulgaria.<sup>37</sup> The school continues to gain recognition as students win prizes at other international competitions and find jobs with Western companies. Helgi Tomasson, artistic director of the San Francisco Ballet, comments on the number of Latin dancers in his own company: “They all have a passion in their dance, which I love. Passion and also respect. It is obvious that, when they dance, they do something they feel very proud of. That is not true everywhere; it is frankly difficult to find in male dancing in this country. And that pride, that incredible joy and passion, comes through.”<sup>38</sup> Both Lorena Feijóo and Joan Boada are Cuban-trained principal dancers with the San Francisco Ballet.

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<sup>34</sup>Dunning, “Learning Nuances.”

<sup>35</sup>Anna Kisselgoff, “Discreet Charm of Swans,” *The New York Times*, 20 October 2003, E3.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>38</sup> Octavio Roca, “Latin Fire Spices Up Ballet / San Francisco Dancers Full of Passion, Pride, Joy,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 27 January 2002, 53.

*José Manuel Carreño*

One of American Ballet Theatre's most seasoned principal dancers is José Manuel Carreño. Carreño trained at the Ballet Nacional de Cuba and went on to win the gold medal at the 1987 New York International Ballet Competition and the Grand Prix at the New York International Ballet Competition in 1990. He went on to perform in Europe, joining the English National Ballet in 1990 and the Royal Ballet as a principal in 1993.<sup>39</sup> Carreño began his career with ABT in 1995, and according to critic Anna Kisselgoff, became a “noble[man]... not needing to act to convey his sensuality.” Kisselgoff went on to describe Carreño as “pantherine” with “soft landings and fluency of his muscular and classical style.”<sup>40</sup>

Carreño's style is directly connected with the Alonso legacy. Laura Alonso, Alicia's daughter, coached him for the 1990 International Ballet Competition, and two of his uncles had been principals with Ballet Nacional. Ballet dancing in Cuba is often a multigenerational family affair. In an interview with *Dance Magazine*, ABT artistic director Kevin McKenzie states, “He came to us with that superb Cuban training that's based on the Russian style.”<sup>41</sup>

Unlike Corella, however, Carreño was praised more for his finesse and acting abilities than his pyrotechnical abilities. Critic Jennifer Dunning commended his performance with Susan Jaffe in *Don Quixote* as conveying “experience and sophistication”<sup>42</sup> in his interpretation of the role and in his partnering skills. In a Miami Spanish-language newspaper, *El Nuevo Herald*, Miguel Sirgado wrote that “the public

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<sup>39</sup>*American Ballet Theatre: Dancers*, <[http://www.abt.org/dancers/detail.asp?Dancer\\_ID=20](http://www.abt.org/dancers/detail.asp?Dancer_ID=20)>

<sup>40</sup> Kisselgoff, “Discreet Charm.”

<sup>41</sup> Valerie Gladstone, “Jose Manuel Carreño,” *Dance Magazine*, March 2004, 46.

<sup>42</sup> Jennifer Dunning, “Two Male Virtuosos, One with Tough Guy Charm,” *New York Times*, 22 June 1999, E5.

remains hypnotized by his broad smile, his perfect command of the humor, and that mysterious and enchanting air that he brings to his character.<sup>43</sup>

### *Lorena Feijóo*

Lorena Feijóo's mother, Lupe Calzadilla, was a former principal with the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, and Feijóo entered the school when she was nine years old. Feijóo's training with Alicia Alonso and other faculty members at the school served to prepare her for the roles that she would dance at the San Francisco Ballet. Sean Martinfield, a fine arts critic for the *San Francisco Sentinel*, hails Feijóo as an extraordinary ballerina well suited for classical roles like Giselle or Odette/Odile,<sup>44</sup> and *San Francisco Chronicle* critic Octavio Roca goes even further calling Feijóo the company's "strongest classical ballerina."<sup>45</sup>

Interviews with Feijóo about dancing *Giselle* and her experiences with San Francisco Ballet reveal that much of her artistry comes from her Cuban training. In an interview with Roca, Feijóo describes how the Cuban school coached students heavily on drama and style. Feijóo states, "we have the fast footwork, but also the very slow turns; the round arms, but also the dramatic integrity. Every moment onstage has to mean something. And you need good coaching to reach that."<sup>46</sup>

Speaking of *Giselle*, she told Sean Martinfield of the *San Francisco Sentinel*, that she finds each performance different, although she has performed the ballet numerous times before. She considers the mad scene at the end of the first act to best reveal her strengths as a performer. In the interview she talks through what goes on in her mind

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<sup>43</sup>Miguel Sirgado, "Paloma Herrera y Jose Manuel Carreño: Un 'Don Quixote' para Miami," *El Nuevo Herald*, 2 February 2001, 1C.

<sup>44</sup>Lorena Feijóo, interview by Sean Martinfield, *San Francisco Sentinel*, 26 February 2008.

<sup>45</sup>Roca, "Latin Fire."

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

when she places herself in the character: the wandering thoughts where she reminisces of romance, the mixed feelings of hurt and love, the confusion in the revealed identity of her lover. Feijóo's attention to detail becomes evident when she talks about how important the smallest aspects of the dance are to her: how long her partner waits after knocking on a door, how he tries to sit closer to her so he can embrace her.<sup>47</sup>

Interestingly enough, in another video, Alicia Alonso also talks about what goes through the mad Giselle's mind. She describes the performance in extraordinary detail, and also includes the same kind memories Feijóo mentions when she describes the mad scene. Details are as specific as how Giselle takes off the necklace and “feels as though a serpent is around her neck.”<sup>48</sup> Alonso's level of detail and imagery is reflected in how Feijóo herself approaches the role. Similarities in their interpretations of the roles are visible in gestures, such as the way each dancer holds her chest when she feels her heart weaken or laughs to herself thinking the world around her is a fantasy. Although the training offered at the Cuban school produced many gifted dancers, Feijóo acknowledges that dancers like her “left Cuba for the chance to dance better roles.”<sup>49</sup> Although Feijóo left Cuba for artistic reasons, Alonso's interpretation of various classical roles continues to influence graduates of the Cuban school, like Feijóo.

## **East Asia and Ballet**

### *South Korea's Two Major Ballet Companies*

South Korea's two major ballet companies are located in Seoul. One is led by a former director of the Kirov ballet, and the other by a former head of the Bolshoi. The

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<sup>47</sup> Feijóo, interview with Sean Martinfield.

<sup>48</sup> *Giselle*, 110 min., Video Artists Int'l, 1980, DVD.

<sup>49</sup> Rachel Howard, “Lorena Feijoo Followed Mom's Pointe Steps and Soared on Her Own. Now the Two are Reunited,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 March 2005, C1.

former, the Universal Ballet, is a privately funded ballet company. The latter, the National Company, is government sponsored. Despite the scarcity of ballet companies in Korea, both aspire to international standard and hire Russian coaches to work with Chinese and Korean colleagues. In fact, in 2008, when the Seoul hosted the International Varna Competition, Koreans won three medals, a silver and bronze medal in the women's division, and a bronze medal in the junior women's division.<sup>50</sup>

The lack of medalists in the men's divisions is an interesting phenomenon that can be interpreted in several ways. Ballet is often regarded as a feminine art. In many East Asian cultures, customs like the Japanese tea ceremony, where grace and artistry are key components, are considered feminine. Though the Japanese tea ceremony is performed by both men and women, more submissive aspects of femininity are excluded from what is expected of men, and explicitly expected from women. In fact, Julia Moon, a former Universal Ballet soloist and now the company's general director, is sometimes described in stereotypically female "Asian" terms. For example, Allen Robertson describes her in *The New York Times*, "Moon, an American-born ballerina, is certainly one of the most feminine of dancers, delicately pliant and ethereal. Soft-spoken yet determined."<sup>51</sup> "Delicate" and "soft" are words that one often associates with the stereotypically petite, quiet, Asian woman. To be sure, a small build serves women well in the dance world, since a short woman is easier to partner than a tall one. If Latin men (as opposed to women) dominate the international ballet stage, it is Asian women (as opposed to men) who are filling the ranks of Western companies.

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<sup>50</sup>*Youth America Grand Prix, 2008 Varna Winners* <<http://www.yagp.org/eng/news.asp>>.

<sup>51</sup>Allen Robertson, "A Small Place Reaches for Ballet's Big Time," *The New York Times*, 29 July 2001, 2, 20.

One might even say that cultural expectations have helped to popularize ballet in East Asia, making ballet an art form that can easily slip into East Asian societies. Moon states, “I think ballet suits us because Koreans are very lyrical... there is a lot of grace in the women, and the men are very masculine.”<sup>52</sup> This gender traditionalism mirrors the conventionalized depiction of gender in many ballets. Male roles in the ballet are typically heterosexual. Additionally, the traditional respect for authority figures in the Asian world lends itself to the hierarchical structure of most ballet companies. According to Allen Robertson, “throughout Korean society, mentors are honored, even revered, which may explain why these dancers so easily fit into the benign, hierarchical dictatorship that is the structure of all classical-ballet companies.”<sup>53</sup> Critics have found the Korean companies to be well coordinated, well trained, stylistically uniform, and precise.

South Korea's cultural differences, however, are not all conducive to the development of ballet companies. The overwhelming female to male dancer ratio is common elsewhere; however, Korea has additional roadblocks. For instance, men have two to three years of compulsory military service that coincides with the age when ballet dancers typically begin their professional careers. Military service is an official obstacle with which Korean companies must deal. An additional, but unofficial one is the cultural expectation for women to continue their education in universities.<sup>54</sup>

Universal Ballet has worked its way to international recognition in the past twenty-four years. Much of the company's training has been based on the Kirov school, and initially, the Universal Ballet toured internationally with classics such as *Swan Lake*

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Virginia Johnson, "World Class From Seoul," *Pointe*, 1 August 2004, 42-45, 92-93.

and *Romeo and Juliet*, and hired well-known ballet partners, choreographers, and designers. Over the years, the company also managed to convince the South Korean government to make some exceptions in the military requirement in order to retain male dancers.

Universal Ballet has made South Korea a dance center, in addition to producing dancers who join companies outside of South Korea. Both of ABT's Korean dancers, Eun Young Ahn and Hee Seo, are corps dancers who trained at the company's affiliated school, the Universal Ballet Academy in Washington, D.C. In 2003, Hee Seo won the Prix de Lausanne Award in Switzerland and the Grand Prix at the Youth American Grand Prix in New York.<sup>55</sup>

*China and Ballet as a Higher Education: Yuan Yuan Tan*

Yuan Yuan Tan is a principal ballerina with the San Francisco Ballet. Born and raised in Shanghai, China, Tan studied at the Shanghai Dancing School. In China, a dancer's career begins at an early age, so Chinese dancers have a head start in their training compared to Western students. Yuan Yuan Tan boarded at the Shanghai dancing school at age eleven, but most students begin at age ten. Selection to the school is very competitive, and the school will often choose one student out of a thousand applicants. In an interview with CNN's Kristie Lu Stout, Tan talked about her training in China.

Students woke at 6 a.m., at 6:30 students prepared for their forty-five minute run to and from the Shanghai zoo to develop endurance; breakfast was served shortly thereafter, and morning ballet classes began at 8 a.m. and went on until noon. The

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<sup>55</sup>*American Ballet Theatre: Dancers*,  
<<http://www.abt.org/dancers/default.asp?page=S&section=corpsdeballet>>

afternoons were reserved for academic studies in areas like music, history, and mathematics.<sup>56</sup>

Tan's parents originally had mixed feelings about a career for her in dance. Her mother had wanted to become a dancer as a young girl and harbored the same hopes for her daughter. Her father, on the other hand, was an engineer and hoped that his daughter would become a doctor or an engineer. Tan's father, as a traditional Chinese parent, also had objections to the abbreviated costuming often worn by female dancers as well as their close physical contact with male dancers. So, according to Tan, her parents flipped a coin. "Heads ballet, tails engineering or something else." Tan laughs, as she tells the story.

Since most of China's educational facilities are government funded, the competition for admission to the Shanghai Ballet School is fierce. According to Tan, the competition kept standards high even after admission. Tan's first few months at the school were difficult since she started a year later than the other students in her program, and she often found herself crying in a corner because she found it difficult to keep up. However, Tan managed to catch up with the rest of the class, winning a few competitions along the way.

At eighteen, she moved to the United States to join the San Francisco Ballet, and three years later, was promoted to the rank of principal. She was the youngest principal in the company, and the only Chinese dancer with a principal rank in a major Western ballet company.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Yuan Yuan Tan, interview with Kristie Lu Stout, *CNN: Talk Asia*, 27 June 2008.

<sup>57</sup>Tan, interview with Kristie Lu Stout.

Tan claims that her Chinese heritage taught her always to try her best. She attributes her success both to this mentality and also to fate, since her career was the product of pure probability. However, one might ask why then is Tan the only Chinese dancer to enjoy a high position in a Western company. Chinese training is clearly advanced enough to have produced several principal dancers, and there are no obvious factors indicating that the Chinese culture is career averse in terms of ballet, so there is no clear answer as to why Tan is the only noted Chinese principal dancer. In fact, there have been thirteen Chinese semi-finalists and finalists in the past six Prix de Lausanne competitions, nine since 2004. This indicates that Chinese dancers are beginning to gain visibility in the international ballet world, and are becoming less like foreigners in a traditionally Western art form. However China's success in competitions has not yet been translated into proportionate successes with Western companies.

Yuan Yuan Tan's role of Desdemona in Lar Lubovitch's *Othello* captured many of the key elements of Shakespeare's play. Despite the average audience member's preconceived image of a white Desdemona married to a dark Moor of whom her father disapproves, Tan's ethnicity does not detract from the dramatic aspects of her character. *Othello's* story is about an interracial marriage during racist times. Desmond Richardson dances the role of Othello. Racial tension continues throughout the ballet and into Desdemona's death scene when she is tragically strangled by the man she loves and trusts. Tan's technical capabilities and malleable style allow her to mold to Richardson's partnering, while the tears in her eyes and facial expression reveal a heart-broken woman. The choreography alternates between forceful turns and catches to more fluid partnering

until Desdemona lies lifeless on the ground.<sup>58</sup> The role showcases both Tan's technical and dramatic abilities.

Tan's pioneering role as a Chinese ballerina has increased her visibility. In October 2004 *Time Asia* listed her as a “Hero of Asia,” calling her “China's Dancing Queen” and praising her stage presence and international impact. Tan has danced for high profile political figures like U.S. President Bill Clinton, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, and Chinese President Hu Jintao.<sup>59</sup> In 2006, Tan performed a full-length ballet, *Magpie Bridge*, at a charity concert in Shanghai to promote peaceful relations between China and Japan.<sup>60</sup> Heidi Landgraf writes about Tan's life, “Tan is happy to represent the People's Republic of China, her native country, at public events when she can. In fact, she considers it quite an honor.”<sup>61</sup> Tan has been able to rise to the attention of audience members and the media, becoming a symbol and idol for many young Chinese dancers.

*Japan Crazy over Ballet: Tetsuya Kumakawa*

“When I returned to Japan it was just like a big rock concert. All women and just screaming,”<sup>62</sup> answers Tetsuya Kumakawa when asked what things were like when he returned home to Japan after a successful career with the Royal Ballet. Kumakawa began his ballet studies at a time when Tokyo already had ballet competitions and visiting artists to coach students. However, in Japan, as in Spain, professional opportunities were limited.

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<sup>58</sup> “Dance in America: Lar Lubovitch's *Othello* from the San Francisco Ballet,” 84 min., Kultur Video, 2003, DVD.

<sup>59</sup> Laura A. Locke, “Yuan Yuan Tan: China's Dancing Queen,” *Time Asia*, 4 October 2004  
<[http://www.time.com/time/asia/2004/heroes/hyuan\\_yuan\\_tan.html](http://www.time.com/time/asia/2004/heroes/hyuan_yuan_tan.html)>.

<sup>60</sup> *San Francisco Ballet: Dancers*,  
<<http://www.sfballet.org/about/company/dancers/view.asp?id=12340021>>

<sup>61</sup> Heidi Landgraf, “A Day in the Life of Yuan Yuan Tan,” *Pointe*, June/July 2003, Vol. 4, Iss. 3, 34-39.

<sup>62</sup> Tetsuya Kumakawa, interview with CNN, 7 December 2007.

Aware of this, Kumakawa pushed for recognition from visiting artists in the hope of receiving an offer from a school abroad. Kumakawa explains, “if a ballet teacher came to teach in Sapporo I always wanted to be involved in those classes -- so I might get a chance to be invited to the West or America, wherever outside Japan.”<sup>63</sup> As a result of Kumakawa's efforts, Swiss choreographer Hans Meister suggested that he attend the Royal Ballet School.

Shortly thereafter, Anthony Dowell offered Kumakawa a position in the Royal Ballet. Nevertheless, the Royal Ballet School decided to send Kumakawa to compete in the 1989 Prix de Lausanne, which was held that year in Tokyo. Like Corella, Kumakawa performed the variation from *Don Quixote*, displaying high jumps, quick beats, and high extensions. Kumakawa won the Gold Medal and the Prince Takamado Prize at the competition, which was held in Tokyo.<sup>64</sup> In a recording of that performance, his leaps appear suspended in midair; his balances are sustained, and he reveals control of his technique and very good training. Though his relevés are not the highest, he brings the ends of his multiple pirouettes to a slow stop.

In the year that Kumakawa competed, the Prix de Lausanne witnessed an influx of Japanese dancers. *The New York Times* critic Anna Kisselgoff states that during the late 1980's, competitive ballet events had “seen a large number of young Japanese male dancers come to the fore.”<sup>65</sup> Since then, the influx has increased. In the past six years, a total of thirty semi-finalists and finalists in the Prix de Lausanne have been from Japan.

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<sup>63</sup>Kumakawa, interview with CNN.

<sup>64</sup> Anna Kisselgoff, “Cuban Ballet Student Wins at 18<sup>th</sup> Prix de Lausanne,” *The New York Times*, 29 January 1990, C18.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

Kumakawa has helped popularize ballet in Japan. His success in the West with the Royal Ballet has provided the encouragement that Japanese schools needed to continue producing ambitious and high achieving students. After dancing with the Royal Ballet for ten years, he returned to Japan and started his own ballet company, the K-Ballet. Kumakawa explains that Japan did not have the same kind of ballet environment that existed in the West. “Japan was more of a challenge to create theatrical work, particularly ballet because we were so behind compared to London or New York. The environment wasn't there. Dance wasn't treated properly and audiences didn't know much about dance.”<sup>66</sup> Kumakawa paints a picture of a country that appreciated ballet as an alien form, but had not yet adopted the art as its own.

His efforts to change the ballet scene in Japan include mounting large professional productions for the general public. Since his company's inception, men in the Japanese audience have jumped from one to ten percent.<sup>67</sup> Also, audiences have come to receive ballets in much the same manner as audiences in the West.

### **International Recognition: The Competitions**

Many international dancers who have earned places in well-known companies have done so by gaining recognition through competitions. International competitions give students the opportunity to thoroughly prepare for a performance, be seen by an international jury, and have the chance to win scholarships or apprenticeships to schools and companies outside their home country. For students from countries where there are few ballet companies and little funding for dance, international competitions are often the only path to a professional career. The school affiliated with the Ballet Nacional de Cuba

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<sup>66</sup>Kumakawa, interview with CNN.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

first earned international recognition in 1964, but U.S. and Eastern European schools continued to provide the majority of competitors until about a decade ago. In 2008, four of the seven winners of the Prix de Lausanne are from non-USA and non-eastern European countries.<sup>68</sup> The figures are similar for the Grand Prix.<sup>69</sup> The ratios, however, are reversed for winners in 2000 and earlier.

Elena Kunikova, Kirov-trained ballet teacher, choreographer, and specialist on classical ballet who works in New York, stressed the artistry and training involved in preparing for these competitions. Kunikova describes how some coaches tend to push for “higher kicks and tricks” to get the attention of judges, neglecting the prerequisite of proper training to prepare students for more turns, or the strength to do a variation that requires a dancer to roll softly through her feet. As a teacher, Kunikova links the influx of international dancers to fluctuations in the international economy. “There are many competitors from economically disadvantaged regions,” Kunikova says. Despite the fact that it is expensive to travel and to take part in these competitions, schools and coaches see the costs as a worthwhile investment.<sup>70</sup>

Even for students who do not win medals, scholarships, or apprenticeships from the competition, increased visibility in the ballet world can earn a place in a leading international school. As Kunikova wrote in *Dance Magazine* about the Prix de Lausanne, “All participants, including those who do not make it beyond the first round, can keep taking daily classes and participate in the final class, called 'The Job Exchange.' Here directors of dance schools can take a look before the 'Networking Forum,' at which they

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<sup>68</sup>*Prix de Lausanne winners list*: <<http://www.prixdelausanne.org/e/prize/prizewinners.php#1999>>

<sup>69</sup>Youth America Grand Prix Winners: <<http://www.yagp.org/eng/nyc00.asp>>.

<sup>70</sup>Interview with Elena Kunikova, New York, 15 October 2008.

will extend invitations to study to the participants they like.”<sup>71</sup> Students are selected based on attributes ranging from physical build to personality.

International competitions offer major companies a pre-screening process. Many competitors are already gifted with good technical training, but juries choose winners based on artistic potential. The presentation and personality that a dancer puts into a variation will set him or her apart from other competitors. Professional companies need performers who have both technique and artistry. A young dancer is not expected to have complete mastery of his or her art. However, if a dancer shows an ability to make conscious stylistic and interpretative decisions, he or she is likely to be a valuable younger member in a company; a company can then develop the talent from an early age and produce major stars like Corella, Lacarra, and Carreño.

### **Typecasting and Ethnic Diversity**

#### *US Population Statistics as of 2006*

Ballet has become more ethnically diverse over the years. However, the populations of Western countries have also become increasingly diverse. According to the U.S. Census, 14.8% of all Americans are of Latino/Hispanic descent, and 4.4% are of Asian decent. In San Francisco, 14.1% are Hispanic, and 32.1% are Asian. New York City has an opposite tilt with 25.4% Hispanic, and 11.1% Asian.<sup>72</sup> While it is obvious that dancers who contribute to ballet's increasing ethnic diversity are generally from foreign countries, the growing percentages of Americans of Hispanic and Asian backgrounds allows audiences to begin to shape what they expect to see on an American stage. A ballet company's composition can no longer be a homogeneous company minus

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<sup>71</sup>Elena Kunikova, “Inside the Prix de Lausanne: Where You Don’t Have to Win to be a Winner,” *Dance Magazine*, January 2005, 80.

<sup>72</sup>*United States Census Bureau: Quick Facts*, <<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd>>

the handful of Russians as in the 1960's and 1970's. There are too many different types of dancers that look good on stage, and many different types of people who would appreciate each kind of dancer.

Thirty years ago, audience members might have wondered what an Asian Giselle would look like, or a very tan Cuban Romeo. At that time, the thought may not have even crossed people's minds. However, extraordinary talent from different corners of the globe has surpassed most ethnic biases with respect to typecasting. International ballet competitions have been key mechanisms in displaying diverse youth dancing all of the classical roles. Artistic directors of companies can then see the range of talent, and that each dancer regardless of ethnicity has the capability of fitting into any given role. Perhaps in another few decades, all international ballet companies will be equally mixed.

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