

Dancing the Orishas: From Havana to Arcata

By Oluyinka Parsons-Akinjiola

Saturday, July 28th, I stood in the wing of the Van Duzer stage with a line of dancers pressed behind me. Nearly 30 musicians and singers set the ambiance of the theater as Lazaro Galarraga initiated the songs for the orishas. We proceeded into the proscenium like a wave supported by the coro, and began to dance for Yemanja, the Yoruba Orisha of the ocean and motherhood. Our arms and long white skirts move as single units, mimicking the crashing of waves and cycles of the ocean. Our gestures remain gentle yet stern, never breaking momentum.

Encoded in our performance is a history, that permits the characterizations of the orishas to unfold with dramatic quality allowing the dance to speak for itself.¹ This quality is an important aspect of folkloric performance that was communicated to me by Danys La Mora, faculty at *The Explorations in Afro-Cuban Drum & Dance workshop*, instructor at the *Alvin Ailey School* and director of the company *Oyu Oro*. The performance mentioned marked the conclusion to a week of intensive Afro-Cuban song, percussion and dance studies in Arcata, California at *the Explorations in Afro-Cuban Drum & Dance workshop (Explorations)*.

Through participating, observing, learning and performing, this workshop places participants in the midst of a cultural movement, grounded in history and propelled by the art of preservation. When I joined the instructors for the concluding performance I felt a sense of continuity and connection to Cuba's first folkloric companies. From *Folklorico de Oriente* and the *Conjunto Folklorico Nacional (CFN)*, to the Van Duzer stage in Arcata, the performance retains the integrity and traditions of Afro-Cuban culture.

¹ Mora, Danys. Interview by Oluyinka Akinjiola. Written interview. September 28, 2012.

The danced, sung and musical traditions that honor African heritage in Cuba have been carried to the United States through the teaching and performances of Afro-Cuban companies and artists. As I look at a time line from 1959 when the first folkloric companies were established, to this year's *Explorations in Afro-Cuban Drum and Dance workshop*, socio-political movements in both Cuba and the United States have brought these communities together. This presentation explores these social movements and how the body is used as the medium for cultural understanding and community building through Afro-Cuban dance.

Through the Explorations workshop, I and other participants are allowed to engage with the complexities of folklore and dialogue with history of folkloric performance. When dancing another's culture there is a process of understanding through embodiment. La Mora also explains the historical and cultural fountain of information in Afro-Cuban folklore allows individuals and communities "to know, develop and process many generations of a culture of African descendents. It also allows more contemporary expressions, placing common foot prints between cultures, where they can identify the differences and similitude that will enrich the knowledge of the African influence in the American Continent."² Months prior to joining the workshops faculty, I began to research how this performance culture began and how this influenced the *Explorations workshop* today.

Folkloric companies began integrating contemporary approaches to folklore and Cuban history following the Cuban Revolution in 1959. The repertory of dance companies became part of the socialist movement to Cubanize the arts, representing the melding between Spanish and

² Mora, Danys. Interview by Oluoyinka Akinjiola. Written interview. September 28, 2012.

African heritage which redefined Cubanness.³ Artists that joined the national companies found agency in how folklore was to be represented using their artistry to portray the intricacies of Cuban culture. Although the folk art was modified for the stage, the performance still maintained a relationship to the human experience and reviving traditions, lives and aspiration of Afro-Cuban people.⁴

Performers developed ways to embody archives of history, culture, and the objectives of Afro-Cuban religious rituals. The performers also convey the cultural geography and diversity of the African traditions on the island. La Mora explains that:

The different groups that arrived in Cuba from Africa have distinct geographic settling places. That permits to establish the styles or differences in each region; that marks the specialty of each company. Havana has Yoruba, Carabalies (Abakua) Congo/Bantu ethnicities; Santiago has Haitian/Dahomeyan influence; and in Matanzas the Arara/Dahomeyan, Arara Sabalu and others make this city characteristics strong too. It doesn't mean each region does not touch other regions, as a professional company the responsibility of the African influence in dance is general.⁵

As these concepts were staged viewers were also educated on the dimensions needed to access the essence of folklore. In the 1960's and 1970's Cuban folkloric artists started to make an impact in North America through touring and teaching classes at workshops in Banff and Tijuana. Howie Kaufman, creator and director of *Explorations*, attended a workshop in Tijuana

³ Diedre Brill, "La escuela cubana: Dance education and performance in revolutionary Cuba" (PhD. diss., University of Pennsylvania 2007), 73.

⁴ Joyce Aschenbrenner, Katherine Dunham, *Reflections on the Social Political Contexts of Afro-American Dance* (New York: Concert on Research and Dance Inc. Dance Research Annual XII, 1981) 21.

⁵ Mora, Danys. Interview by Oluyinka Akinjiola. Written interview. September 28, 2012.

that featured the Cuban masters Lazaro Ros, Regino Jiminez, Mario “Asperina” Jauregui, dancer Margarita from the CFN, and drummers from Danza Contemporanea.⁶ After attending this workshop from 1989 to 1991, Kaufman used the Tijuana workshop as a model for building what would become *Explorations*⁷.

HISTORY

Coinciding with Cuba’s artistic movement in the 1960s, the northwest of the United States experienced the “*Back to the land*” movement. During this time, “people were leaving cities and moved to Humboldt or Mendicino county to become self sufficient, get land and grow their own food. In the mid and late 1970s, people were getting in to native culture and spiritual ceremonies.⁸” “In 1979 and 1980, people started getting interested in Santeria. Way back in the woods, they started learning bembe, bata, and songs. David Peñalosa and Carlos Gomez were the first Humboldt based teachers. Those two are the main reason that the culture exists in Humboldt.”⁹ Similar to a necessity for the training in Cuba, continued music and dance classes were forming in Arcata, California.

“David (Peñalosa) started teaching drummers in Arcata more seriously in 1985. Then in 1989, Ruben Romeu, who studied mostly modern and folklore, came as a student at Humboldt State University. He approached the dance department and they allowed him to teach an Afro Cuban dance class which lasted for 2 years. His arrival solidified the

⁶ Kaufman, Howie. Interview by Oluyinka Akinjiola. Phone interview. August 29th, 2012.

⁷ Kaufman.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

community and marked a high point in Humboldt County. College students were finally dancing, and we had all the elements.”¹⁰

But, the impetus for Kaufman creating *Explorations* came from a series of events. In 1992 and 1994, the Humboldt community came together and brought Los Muñequitos to Humboldt. Then the long standing Summer Arts program, formerly offering world percussion by Eugene Novotney, was moved out of Humboldt in 1995.¹¹ These events revealed a hole in the community, which inspired Kaufman to conceptualize a new workshop. Kaufman drafted a proposal for *Explorations* that was finally accepted by the Humboldt State University’s extension program. The first workshop featuring CK Ladzekpo, Miguel Bernal, Jose Francisco Barroso, and David Peñalosa in 1996 included both African & Afro Cuban studies.¹²

The integrity of the program is continued by current *Explorations* faculty that incorporate their stylistic influences from different regions of Cuba, companies and institutions. Danys la Mora explains that in addition to representing the technique and ability to move through space, dancers must “narrate a history throughout the body, while using beauty and all aspect that describes the dialog.” In communicating this dialog “the essence of folklore must be maintained while using new contemporary accents.”¹³ Folkloric classes have been challenging artists in the physicality of the dances as well as the intellectual concepts conveyed in the body since folkloric programs were established in the 1960s. Artists like Danys La Mora and Silfredo la O, have been educated and trained in influential institutions like the Escuela Nacional de Art (the ENA), la Instituto Superior de Arte, Superior Arts School, the Vocational art school in Santiago, the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mora, 2012.

famous Cabildo Teatral Santiago, and performance art programs with Folklórico National in Havana and Matanzas.¹⁴

Silfredo La O, dance faculty at *Explorations* and contemporary painter, graduated from la ENA in 1994. He described the folkloric classes he received in the national school as having a more knowledgeable approach, incorporating history along side of dance studies. In La O's technique classes, he challenges dancers to find artistry by exploring an understanding of the Afro-Cuban dances in their bodies. For example, one afternoon our class of primarily women personified the male gestures of Chango, Orisha of thunder and lightning, accentuating anatomical features that our bodies did not possess. His regal and prideful mannerisms broaden our shoulders and lift our chins, changing our strides across the floor as we move to his specified rhythms. We negotiated our masculinity exploring what it is to embody Shango.

After beginning her Afro Cuban studies in 1990 during the creation of the workshop, Alison Hong Novotney continued in performance and education of Afro-Cuban tradition and is now on faculty at *Explorations*. Hong has witnessed that the workshop creates a small concentrated community; also providing a valuable resource because of the geographic barriers for her and others continual studies outside of Cuba.¹⁵ Since the 1970s, non-Cubans, have also become conversant educators of Afro-Cuban folklore. Like Hong-Novotney and Peñalosa, Michael Spiro, John Santos, and others, they offer completely different approaches to this field of study. An advantage of having non-Cuban teachers such as Spiro, Lamson, and Santos are that they have been totally integrated in the culture.¹⁶ They have had to learn to bridge both cultures, and have been totally absorbed by it, yet they also can navigate both worlds, the languages,

¹⁴ Mora, 2012.

¹⁵ Hong-Novotney.

¹⁶ Hong-Novotney.

notation, etc.¹⁷ Also, teachers like Hong-Novotney have the ability to facilitate this intermediate world, both sides of the spectrum and there are benefits to that for students.¹⁸

Hong-Novotney has lead workshops on not just dance, but more from the perspective of creating community. Stating, “I was really tying in my experiences and how people of mixed cultures relate to Afro Cuban music and dance.”¹⁹ “For me as a Chinese-American born in the U.S., I enjoy (Afro-Cuban) as a vehicle for teaching, learning and sharing; helping to cross boundaries. That is what it has done for me and what I hope it can do for others.” I think that this is especially important to people of different cultures not necessarily fitting into the “box” of what you would expect them to; like myself studying AfroCuban music. For people who are of mixed backgrounds, you are always negotiating your place, and trying to find out where you fit in. I think that for people of color this can be an issue, and for me, studying Afro Cuban music and dance has helped me find my sense of place.”²⁰

Silfredo la O has also created a sense of place in San Diego by using contemporary approaches to the concepts of folklore. Influenced by painter Wilfredo Lam, whom La O described as the Cuban Picasso, and his family La O continues his career as a performance artist on the West Coast of the United States. He has blurred the lines between dancer and painter, inviting audiences into his artistic process as performance. He states:

“My painting is based on my tradition, sometimes Ogun, Yemaja, Ochossi, Afrekete, I use my vocabulary as a dancer. I paint for them.”²¹ The process is personal yet steeply rooted in

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Hong-Novotney, Alison. Interview by Oluyinka Akinjiola. Phone interview. August 6th and 16th, 2012.

²⁰ Hong-Novotney.

²¹ La O, Silfredo. Interview by Oluyinka Akinjiola. Phone Interview. October 1, 2012.

his Culture, and family. La O also describes his process as “a conversation that you need to have for your own self. You have to do it for you.”²²

Concluding

In the past 16 years, *Explorations* has been providing the “immersion factor,” what Hong-Novotney describes as, providing an atmosphere where you can become enveloped in the music and dance culture.²³ Engulfing participants is “a spiritual, educative and artistic nutrition for the community.”²⁴ In our community that was created from July 21st through the 28th I was surrounded by students, teachers, performers, Cubans, Californians, New Yorkers, etc. We spanned in generations and experiences, from those that experienced the revolution in Cuba to those finding place in the traditions and cultures of the Afro-Cuban people.

The *Explorations* faculty concert concluded with Rumbas and Comparsas similar to the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional’s first work, *Ciclo Musica Popular*. The *Conjunto* found appropriate to conclude with these songs and dances which are found in festivities emphasizing that liberation had come. Especially with the use of rumba, which offers space for improvisation and individual expression,²⁵ a sense of triumph is left with the audience signifying that the people are in a time of victory.

The workshop concluded with another year of success drawing new participants, community members and supporters to celebrating Cuban culture. My experience at the *Explorations in Afro-Cuban Drum & Dance* is invaluable, and has allowed me to build relationships with great artists like Howie Kaufman, Alison Hong-Novotney, Silfredo La O and

²² La O, Silfredo. 2012.

²³ Hong-Novotney.

²⁴ La Mora.

²⁵ Diedre Brill, “La escuela cubana,” 133.

Danys La Mora. I would like to thank them for contributing to this presentation. Through participating in interviews, they have allowed me to share their contributions to the fields of music and dance.

I also want to acknowledge that Afro-Cuban traditions have also arrived to the United States and throughout the world by authors, painters, initiates of La Regla de Ocha and other religions. Through individuals sharing their culture and experiences I and many others have benefited.

Thank you