Suki John

Contemporary Dance in Cuba: Técnica Cubana as Revolutionary Movement.

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Not long after the Cuban Revolution, the innovative choreographer Ramiro Guerra formed, under the aegis of the new state, the Conjunto Nacional de Danza Moderna, a contemporary dance company that, like the national folkloric and ballet companies, sought to project a Cuban identity to the people of its country and to the world. Guerra had studied ballet in Cuba and modern dance in New York with masters like Martha Graham and José Limón, but he wanted the company to reflect a particularly Cuban way of moving and a Cuban musicality. Choosing Cuban dancers of varying professional and racial backgrounds and associates with modern dance backgrounds from the United States and Mexico, Guerra sought to extract varied Cuban ways of moving and merge them into modern dance choreographies with Cuban import. Together with his associates, and later dancemakers in the company that is now called Danza Contemporánea de Cuba (and offshoot modern dance companies), he evolved a teaching technique, the *técnica cubana*, that combines a basis in modern dance with ballet and Cuban folkloric elements; it allows dancers and choreographers who master it great flexibility and virtuoso possibilities that do indeed reflect a special *cubanidad*.

Suki John, a choreographer, dance writer, and assistant professor at Texas Christian University, is well placed to write about how contemporary dance is made in Cuba. She visited Cuba in 1973, returned for her first look at *técnica cubana* in 1988, and since 1992 has choreographed for Narciso Medina's company in Havana and also for Danza Contemporánea and the Ballet Nacional. *Contemporary Dance in Cuba* puts in place the social, political, historical, and dance contexts for Cuba's important, but too little known contemporary dance-making. More than that, amplified by David Garten's astute photographs, it offers a personal, vivid look at Cuban society as, despite myriad difficulties, it makes vibrant, significant contemporary dance.

John alternates background information of many types in regular text, enough to make sense of the evolution of contemporary dance in Cuba, with more personal accounts in italics that show her intense and expressive involvement with Cuban everyday and artistic life. Having been to Cuba in 1988 when creative work flourished and people ate substantially, she is shocked on returning in 1992, to choreograph for Medina's company, to find how difficult daily life has become in the Special Period, after the end of the Soviet Union and its subsidies to Cuba. Everyone makes do with improvisation and frustration. Some plan to leave and some actually do so. Medina manages to keep his

company going and, with trips abroad to perform, teaching tourists, and continued renown as an artist, finds himself in a better position than many. John returns several times to work with his company and others.

Contemporary Dance in Cuba gives a good foundation for understanding Cuban modern dance, but it is not comprehensive. John discusses some of Medina's work and gives his solo, *La Espera*, the most detailed analysis of any dance in the book. She did not appreciate this piece about waiting for a bus in Havana when she first saw it at a dance festival in Finland in 1991, but understood it well after she experienced the trials of the Special Period. She views the film *Historia de un Ballet (Suite Yoruba)*, made of and about that seminal work by Ramiro Guerra in 1962 and describes it; she also recounts information about Guerra's work and life from both her research and her interviews with him. She interviews Alicia Alonso and discusses what makes Cuban ballet distinctive. She describes less about Eduardo Rivero's very beautiful 1971 ritual dance, *Súlkary*, Danza Contemporánea's signature piece, than about its mixed reception from New York's none-too-perceptive dance critics when Danza presented it at its first season in New York in 2011. *Súlkary*, John says "is one of a handful of classic modern dances that exemplify *técnica cubana*. Guerra's *Suite Yoruba*, Medina's *Metamorfosis*, and Marianela Boán's *Chorus Perpetuus* are also considered part of that canon" (p. 98). But Boán and other contemporary Cuban choreographers of note are only mentioned; their work is not explored.

Similarly, in writing about Cuba's African-derived spiritual traditions, she merely mentions Kongo-Angolan, Arará, and Carabalí, but goes into detail about the orishas of Santería and their importance in Cuban dance. The rhythms of the orishas are played, for instance, as part of the *técnica cubana* classes John describes. In her discussion of Cuba's manifold folkloric dances, she singles out rumba, though she also offers an interesting discussion of the mixture of African movement, Spanish influences, and European embraced social dance position that led to Cuba's exciting, sensual, and always evolving array of social dance.

There is an occasional disconnect between the notes and the bibliography—not all the note entries are in the latter. And John's chapter in *Caribbean Dance from Abakuá to Zouk: How Movement Shapes Identity*, a book I edited in 2005, is mistitled "Cuban Modern Dance" when it is actually called "The Técnica Cubana."

If Suki John does not tell you everything you might want to know about Cuban contemporary dance and the technique behind it, what she does offer is a picture of Cuban life, people, and creativity revolving around making modern dance that is alive to all its pleasures, frustrations, and contradictions.

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