



**Flash Review 2, 10-17: Oh, those Cubans!  
With Feeling, Ballet Nacional de Cuba Takes California**

By Aimée Ts'ao  
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BERKELEY -- After seeing the Ballet Nacional de Cuba perform "Giselle" two seasons ago, I was eagerly looking forward to its current offering of Arthur Saint-Leon's "Coppelia" which the company brought to Zellerbach Hall this past weekend. I could only hazard a guess that it had been almost thirty years and a half a world away that I had last seen a live production of this ballet based on E.T.A. Hoffman's story. (He's also responsible for "The Nutcracker"). I worried that seeing three performances in as many days would be excruciating. Fortunately, I loved watching the company, founded by Alicia Alonso, as a whole every time and relished the different interpretations of the three lead couples.

As with "Giselle," this production suffers from the same economic straits that prevent the Cubans from having the costumes and decor that they deserve. Yes, politics does affect the arts. And ideally, I would like to think that the arts influence politics though the cynic in me would most likely deny it. I am not about to start ranting, I leave that to my editor, but the United States's embargo of Cuba is the reason this company has to creatively make do with whatever material resources they can scrape together. What it lacks in rich fabrics for costumes and funds to build and transport substantial stage decor, the performers more than make up for with their dancing and acting. And that drives home the point, once again, that it's the human element that really matters. How many times have we been to see a sumptuous production of one of the classics, replete with gorgeous costumes and elegant decor, only to be bored with one-dimensional pyrotechnics or worse, and left wondering why we haven't been magically transported to another realm? Money does not necessarily buy artistry. Vermin in Versace gowns are still vermin.

But those Cubans! They have two very important things going for them. First, their culture almost guarantees a love of dance and music, and the ability to meld them together. And second, they receive some of the best dance training in the world. Together those two aspects make for amazing performances. In "Coppelia," as in "Giselle," the entire corps de ballet becomes a perfect frame for the soloists. They become real townspeople and peasants who live and breathe, talk and laugh, and care about each other. The power of their commitment to their roles pulls you into their world

so strongly that you forget yourself. Unfortunately, although the company had been promised an orchestra, we suffered through taped music. In spite of that, the dancers are still extremely musical, and in combination with their precise footwork and perfect synchronization, they are remarkable, both in their dancing and their mime.

Friday night's performance featured Lorna Feijoo as Swanilda and Joel Carreno as Franz. Both dancers come from dance dynasties. Feijoo's mother danced with the company and now teaches in the school, while her sister, Lorena, is a principal dancer with San Francisco Ballet. Carreno's brother is Jose Manuel Carreno, principal dancer in American Ballet Theatre, and his cousin Alihaydee, is a premier dancer in the Cuban company with him. Feijoo possesses an impeccable technique. From astonishing balances to fleet footwork to perfect pirouettes, she never leaves them as mere tricks, but imbues them all with intelligent and subtle nuances completely in character with the role. Her open face is a perfect slate for showing all manner of passing emotions. In the second act, her mechanical doll variation is uncannily robotic, while her Scottish fling shows off her incredibly fast and precise feet. Feijoo only gets better in the third act. In the series of three arabesque balances, lifting her hands from her partner's arm, she increases the length each time until she easily holds the last one for five seconds. But her fouettes, and I am not usually impressed by those sorts of things, are unbelievable. Not only does she alternate singles with doubles, but in the doubles she nonchalantly places one hand behind her head and the other on her hip!

Carreno's boyish naivete works well for Franz and his elevation and turns are stunning. Even when he runs out of steam in his third act variation, you don't care because he comes right back and dances his heart out. Like all the Cuban male dancers I've seen, he is an attentive partner, always presenting the ballerina in the best light and effortlessly spinning out more supported pirouettes than seems possible.

There is an art to matching up partners for leading roles, or maybe it's science since chemistry is the most essential aspect. Putting Viengsay Valdes and Victor Gili together for Saturday night's performance shows that someone knows the finer points of casting. Both these dancers have so much warmth and joie-de-vivre they seduce each other, everyone on stage and in the audience. You love them instantly. At first I thought Valdes wasn't as assured technically as Feijoo, but she proved me wrong. By those third act fouettes, she is whipping them off, two singles and a double in attitude derriere en dehors. I especially noticed her arms and hands, which were always used with finesse. Gili is an excellent actor and superb comedian. Even in doing the same mime as the other Franzes, he manages to embellish and flavor like a good chef. One small detail involved climbing through the window of Dr. Coppelius's house. Instead of merely popping up into the open window, he opened the shutters, still unseen, then placed his hands on the sill before cautiously peering over it. He does not have Carreno's or Oscar Torrado's technique, but you don't care in the least because his enthusiasm and immersion in his role override any shortcomings on that score. Again, the human element wins out and the audience gives them the longest and loudest applause of the

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three performances.

By Sunday's matinee, everyone, myself included, seems just a bit tired. The corps de ballet is still wonderful, and Laura Hormigon and Oscar Torrado show still another perspective on these roles. Getting off to a bad start, Hormigon has the misfortune of being slightly nervous for her opening solo and having the audio system suddenly start making a low, powerful rumble. But as time goes on, she relaxes and shows that she, too, is a wonderful dancer. Torrado has the best balance of technique versus acting. Supple landings from soaring jumps, poised turns and convincing mime make him my all-round favorite.

You would think that I'd had my fill of Cuban dance by now. No. Monday night finds me at "Words on Dance" at the Cowell Theater in San Francisco expecting to hear Lorena Feijoo and fellow SFB dancer Joan Boada in conversation with local dance critic Octavio Roca. Boada is unable to come having had knee surgery on Saturday, so we are left with just two Cubans. Feijoo re-iterates the excellence of the training and coaching for performance, but also reminds us that the economic conditions in her homeland are forcing many dancers to seek careers elsewhere. The result is that instead of twenty ballerinas, there are only a handful left. She also comments on the shortage of resources for good costumes and decor. Later she mentions that her sister Lorna is lucky that Alicia Alonso brings her back pointe shoes from her trips abroad because the Cuban-made ones are like blocks of wood. I had heard from a friend who attended the Dance Critics Association conference in New York City this past July that Laura Alonso, who also attended, said that the dancers and students are in desperate need of pointe shoes. I managed to collect about thirty new pairs from several Bay Area ballet companies that had excess inventory due to personnel changes or generous dancers, and give them to the Ballet Nacional de Cuba. If you have extra new shoes that you don't want or can't use, please give them to this incredible company when they are performing near you. While recent events have caused the dance community, like most communities, to pull together, we should not forget our fellow artists in Cuba who can use our help in a situation that has prevailed for far too many years already. Regardless, go see them! It's both a satisfying arts experience and an education.