**Guerra, Ramiro (b. June 29, 1922, Havana, Cuba – )**

**Summary**

Dancer, choreographer, master teacher, theoretician, and historian Ramiro Guerra is known as the father of Cuban modern dance, which he codified in the technique known throughout Latin America as *técnica cubana*. In 1959, with the backing of Cuba’s Revolutionary government, he founded the national modern dance company, now known as Danza Contemporánea de Cuba. Working with practitioners of ballet, American and Mexican modern dance, Afro-Cuban folklore, and nightclub cabaret, Guerra pioneered a new dance form from the many rich sources of Cuban movement. Guerra’s contributions to Cuban modern dance have shaped generations of dancers and choreographers.

**Early Life and Training**

Guerra was born on June 29, 1922, in Havana to a lawyer, Ramiro Guerra Lopez, and a homemaker, Armanda Suarez Quintana, who died when her son was only five years old. Influenced and inspired by the rich dance culture of Cuba, Guerra earned a law degree he never used, choosing instead to dedicate himself to dance despite the stigma attached to professional male dancers at the time. At Pro-Arte, Havana’s ‘center of international culture’[[1]](#endnote-1) the young Guerra saw Ted Shawn perform and took ballet class alongside Cuba’s first family of ballet: Alicia, Fernando, and Alberto Alonso. Hired in Havana to tour with Colonel de Basil’s Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, Guerra travelled to New York City. After fulfilling his contract, he stayed in New York and immersed himself in modern dance. He studied intensively with Martha Graham and was influenced by Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and José Limón. Returning to Cuba, he performed in a one-man show, where in his own words he ‘began to be respected as belonging to the avant-garde’[[2]](#endnote-2) that was developing in Cuban film, painting, and literature. Guerra’s fascination with exploring ‘how the Cuban body moves’[[3]](#endnote-3) drove him to combine modern dance tropes he had studied with those he invented and observed. Guerra’s lifelong investigation into Cuban movement knowledge resulted in a signature repertory and canonical writings that situate dance within Cuban culture.

**Contributions to Modernism**

Shortly after the Cuban Revolution of 1959, Fidel Castro’s government appointed Guerra director of the Department of Modern Dance within the *Teatro Nacional*. His mandate was to create a dance company with original repertory based in a new, indigenous Cuban modern dance style and technique.[[4]](#endnote-4) Originally called the *Conjunto de Danza Moderna*, the company operated within the new *Teatro Nacional,* which was founded, funded, and fully supported by the revolutionary government that consciously deployed the arts as a means to unite Cubans after the Revolution. Contemporary dance was considered a vehicle for strengthening national identity. Modern dance, which is often marginalized, was brought out of obscurity and into cultural prominence with the blessing of the state. ‘Dance is permeable to all influences, from high culture or low, without any social prejudice,’ wrote Guerra,[[5]](#endnote-5) who modeled this inclusiveness while creating *técnica cubana.* He and his collaborators borrowed popular traditions, combined them with theatrical dance elements, and created a medium of national expression.

**Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Guerra’s candor -- in print and onstage – have earned him both respect and censure from Cuba’s revolutionary government. With the regime’s blessing, he experimented with form, creating a modern dance technique designed to embody Cuba’s multiculturalism and rich dance heritage. However, his experimentation with content – specifically the psychedelic and sexual revolutions – incensed Fidel Castro’s Ministry of Culture. Guerra spent a year creating his incendiary *El decálogo del apocalípsis* (*The Ten Commandments of the Apocalypse,* 1971), in which the great social upheavals of the 1960s were expressed through the breaking of taboos in the dance paradigm itself. The piece was steeped in the aesthetics of psychedelia, happenings, and sexual revolution, and was staged adjacent to the iconic Plaza de la Revolución. Censored before the scheduled opening night in 1971, the work never premiered, and Guerra felt compelled to step down as director of the dance company he created. Though his reputation was rehabilitated in the late 1970s, he chose to focus on writing rather than return to the studio, publishing a dance newsletter and a series of characteristically insightful and provocative works of dance scholarship.

Guerra’s body of work includes over sixty works of choreography, among those *Misiones Culturales* (*Cultural Missions*, 1950), *Sensemayá* (*Water Goddess*, 1955) with text by Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, and *Son para Turistas* (*Son for Tourists*, 1955), considered the first Cuban dance with revolutionary content.[[6]](#endnote-6) Works exploring Afro-Cuban tropes include *Orfeo antillano (Orpheus of the Antilles,1964)*, *Medea y los negreros (Medea and the Slave Traders, 1968),* and the celebrated *Suite Yoruba (Yoruban Suite, 1960)* which was the subject of the 1962 documentary film, *Historia de un Ballet (Suite Yoruba*) (*History of a Ballet*, *Suite Yoruba*, 1962). The aborted *Decálogo del Apocalípsis (1971)* was, in Guerra’s opinion, his ‘best, most complex and contemporary work’.[[7]](#endnote-7) After leaving Danza Contemporánea he continued working with dance companies across Cuba into his eighties, setting dances to everything from traditional Yoruban chants to Stravinsky. *Tríptico oriental (Eastern Triptych,* 1979) was choreographed for the folkloric company, Conjunto Folclórico Nacional de Cuba. *El reino de este mundo (The King of This World,* 1980) was made on the pantomime company Grupo de Pantomima de Cuba. *El canto de ruiseñor (The Song of the Nightingale, 1985)* was created for the classical Ballet de Camagüey. In 1989 Guerra finally returned to *Danza Contemporánia,* the company he created, presenting a collage of his earlier works, *De la memoria fragmentada (Of Fragmented Memory, 1989)* at Havana’s Teatro Mella*.* In 1992 he staged a site-specific work, *Ordalias* (*Ordeals*) in his apartment for interactive audiences of only seven people. His latest choreographic work, *¿Fedra?* (*Phaedra?* 2000)*,* was made for Danza Voluminosa, a company of ample-bodied dancers.

Guerra’s writings include the newsletter he founded, *Toda La Danza, La Danza Toda*, (*All of Dance, Dance All*) and well loved works of dance history and theory such as *Calibán danzante* (*Dancing Caliban*, 1999); *Coordenadas danzarias* (*Dancing Coordinates,* 1999); *Eros baila. Danza y sexualidad* (*Eros Dances: Dance and sexuality*, 2000); and *Apreciación de la danza* (*Dance Appreciation*, 2003).

**Legacy**

Guerra was one of many artists who helped develop a sense of national culture in the years after the Revolution; his efforts helped to make modern dance and dancers integral to the New Cuba. Many of Guerra’s most notable alumni have gone on to create companies, repertories and dance styles of their own. Guerra trained the entire first generation of Cuban modern dancers in *técnica cubana*, including notable dancer/choreographers Eduardo Rivero, Santiago Alfonso, Arnaldo Patterson, Víctor Cuellar, and [Isidro Rolando](http://www.lajiribilla.cu/2012/n587_08/587_13.html). These artists, along with master teacher Manolo Vasquez, actively worked with Guerra in grooming the internationally acclaimed choreographers Marianela Boán, Isabel Bustos, Rosario Cárdenas, and Narciso Medina.

**Suki John**

**Selected List of Works:**

*Misiones Culturales* (*Cultural Missions*, 1950)

*Sensemayá* (*Water Goddess*, 1955)

*Son para Turistas* (*Son for Tourists*, 1955)

Mambí (*Warriors* [*Guerilla fighters in the war against Spain*], 1960)

*Suite Yoruba* (*Yoruban Suite*, 1960)

*Orfeo antillano* (*Orpheus of the Antilles*, 1964)

*Medea y los negreros* (*Medea and the Slave Traders*, 1968)

*Ceremonial de la Danza* (*Ceremony of Dance*, 1968)

*Impromptu Galanta* (Galanta [*Hungarian*]*Impromptu*, 1970)

*Decálogo del Apocalípsis* (*The Ten Commandments of the Apocalypse*, 1971)

*Triptico oriental* (*Eastern Triptych*, 1979)

*De la memoria fragmentada* (*Of Fragmented Memory*, 1989)

*Ordalias* (*Ordeals*, 1992)

*¿Fedra?* (*Phaedra?* 2000)

**References and Further Reading:**

Burdsall, Lorna. (2001) *More Than Just a Footnote: Dancing from Connecticut to Revolutionary* *Cuba.* Quebec: AGMV Marquis. (*More Than Just a Footnote is* Burdsall’s autobiography about living and dancing in Cuba during the formative years of Danza Contemporánea de Cuba.)

Guerra, Ramiro. (2010) “My Experience and Experiments in Caribbean Dance.” *Making Caribbean Dance: Continuity and Creativity in Island Cultures.* Susana Sloat, Ed. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. (Guerra’s chapter on the process of creating the Cuban modern dance technique appears in the second volume of Sloat’s important anthology on Caribbean dance.)

John, Suki. (2012) *Contemporary Dance in Cuba: técnica cubana as Revolutionary Movement.* Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co. Publishers. (*Contemporary Dance in Cuba* contains John’s comprehensive introduction to the sources, creation, and influence of contemporary dance and dancers in Revolutionary Cuba.)

Mousouris, Melinda. (2002) “The Dance World of Ramiro Guerra.” *Caribbean Dance/ From Abakuá to Zouk: How Movement Shapes Identity.* Susanna Sloat, Ed. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. (Mousouris provides a clear and insightful overview of Guerra’s career in the first volume of Sloat’s excellent anthology.)

Pajares, Fidel. (1993) *Ramiro Guerra y la Danza en Cuba*. Quito: Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana. (Pajares provides essential data on the career of Ramiro Guerra.)

**Moving Image Materials**

<http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x4tw5a_historia-de-un-ballet_music>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZG92\_UxYEbI

**Paratextual Materials**

*La Jiribilla: revista de cultura cubana*. This online journal posted a series of articles and photos celebrating Guerra’s 90th birthday in August 2012:

http://www.lajiribilla.cu/2012/n587\_08/587\_15.html

For photos: Best to contact photographer David Garten to see what he can provide in terms of streaming or online photos of Guerra and modern dance in Cuba – he may be able to provide a link

David Garten [dgarten@gmavt.net](mailto:dgarten@gmavt.net)

Notes

1. Guerra, 2010: 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Guerra, 2010: 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This quote is taken from an interview the author conducted with Ramiro Guerra on April 20, 2006 in Havana, Cuba. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Mousouris, 2002: 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Guerra, Ramiro, *La Danza: Amenazas y Resistencias*. Unpublished manuscript, personal communication, 2010. Used with permission of the author. Translation by Mildred Gonzalez. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Pajares, 1993: 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ramiro Guerra, Electronic communication, October 24, 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)