

Review Essay

Rumba: Dance and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba. Yvonne Daniel. 1995. Indiana University Press, Bloomington (and Indianapolis), Indiana. xviii + 196 pp., including Preface, Bibliography, Appendix (for Laban movement-writing, pp.151-166) and 8 photographs. Subject/ Author index (pp. 192-196). Paperback edition, \$12.95. ISBN 0-253-20948-X. Reviewer: Lynn Martin.

Yvonne Daniel has painted a detailed and insightful verbal portrait of the Cuban *rumba* dance complex, based on fieldwork she did in Cuba from 1985 to 1990. Two main themes are delineated and developed: (1) symbolic uses of the *rumba* dance complex by various groups in Cuban society, both historically and within the specific period following the Cuban revolution in 1959 and (2) specific aspects of the dances themselves, such as music, movement patterns, preservation and transmission of historical traditions and performance settings. It would be difficult to imagine a more thorough guide to this remarkable form of dancing and music.

Daniel presently teaches in the Dance Department of Smith College. She was born and grew up in New York City, but she began an undergraduate degree in music and classical piano at Howard University, completing it in 1972 at the University of California, Hayward. Her Master's degree was taken at Mills College in 1975 and she later carried out Doctoral studies in sociocultural anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. She has taught modern dancing and Caribbean dancing for the past twenty years. While living on the east coast, she studied Haitian dancing with Lavinia Williams and Jean-Léon Destiné.

Her original intention was to study the influence of Haitian dances in Cuba, but she was captivated by *rumba* and shifted her research focus. As an Afro-American member of the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional* in Havana, she was not allowed to perform when that group represented Cuba as its national company, but, the hiatuses in performance schedules gave her the opportunity to study other traditional forms of *rumba* with the *Los Muñequitos* performance group (personal communication, December, 1995).

This author's detailed examination of economic and socio-political factors that influence *rumba's* important place in Cuban culture underscores a major concern of Caribbean dance scholars: the relatively low status generally assigned to indigenous Caribbean dance traditions by performers, teachers and researchers inside (and outside) the Caribbean region. One wonders about "[H]ow sparse the research has been on dance in Caribbean anthropology,

which is curious when so much of Caribbean social life involves and accentuates dancing" (Daniel 1995: 20).

Part of the answer lies with the still prevailing influence of Western aesthetic values, i.e.

The paradox of Caribbean life is that the more things change the more they have remained the same....It continues apace today. But it continues against the background of persistent forces that would seek to perpetuate the domination of metropolitan Europe and its cultural extension, North America. It also continues within the context of the old-style "plantation system" not only in terms of economic dependency but also in terms of an abiding Eurocentrism which puts everything European in a place of eminence and things of indigenous (i.e. native born and native bred) or African origin in a lesser place (Nettleford 1978: 3).

Such attitudes have greatly influenced the course of Caribbean folkloric performance and teaching practice over the past fifty years. They imply other problems to the area study as well. Ahye (1983) suggests that many Trinidadian dancers and musicians (e.g. Percival Brode, Geoffrey Holder and Kelvin Rotardier) had to leave the Caribbean for economic and artistic reasons in order to pursue performance opportunities in the United States and Europe.

Since Eurocentric notions of ballet as the technique *par excellence* of dance performance and teaching have not yet been superseded (see Durr 1986 and Keali'inohomoku 1980), it is not surprising that there is ambivalence about this subject:

On the occasions that she [Beryl McBurnie] spoke in public she would sometimes change her stand about certain issues and then later on relent and recover her former posture. One example of this was her opinion about the value of classical ballet to an exponent of folk dance. In her early days she was vehement in her feelings against the ballet and even forbade dancers from taking classes. However, in the 1970s she spoke out in favour of ballet and advocated that it should be taught to all dancers and in the schools. More recently however, she made public her disappointment at superficial approach [*sic*] to the folk dance forms by those trained in modern and ballet technique (Ahye 1983: 104).

The struggle still goes on between those who see the incompatibility of ballet technique as a foundation for the nuances and intricacies of Haitian and other Caribbean dances and those who are convinced that ballet technique is universally suitable for all dance forms. Having noticed the paucity of genuine Caribbean vocabulary in Dunham Technique,¹ Robinson (1986) has made a strong contribution to improved teaching methods over the past decade in Grand Turk and Jamaica. Perhaps others will follow.

These problems do not loom as large to the Cuban *rumberos* as they do to their Caribbean neighbors. Daniel outlines several ways in which Cuba's post-revolutionary policy of economic isolation minimized foreign influences, but at the same time, made life difficult for Cuban citizens. Throughout her explanation, however, we see that the prestige that accrues to *rumba* as a rallying point for Cuban social unity represents an instance where an isolationist stance worked in favor of her national dance form. The unusually well-respected position of *rumba* within the Cuban social system (amplified and embellished following the revolution) is of special interest:

Afro-Cuban rumba, as a symbol of the inclusion of lower-class expressions within the Ministry of Culture's programming, was promoted to assist overarching national principles that would benefit all sectors of the population. Rumba, apparently more than other Cuban dance traditions, expressed an identification with African-derived elements that make up Cuban culture, represented the interests of workers, and solidified the participation of the Cuban artistic community in the social advance of the new political system (Daniel 1995: 16).

The Cuban government put its metaphorical money (albeit limited!) where its mouth was by encouraging both prepared and spontaneous *rumba* events, which spoke for a hoped-for unity among various elements of pluralistic Cuban society - and still does. Daniel probably would not disagree with Nettleford's assessment of the stratification of Cuba's dance society in 1978:

The Cuban professional dance-theatre community displays typical aspects of the "Caribbean dilemma" in the European, creolised mulatto, and African levels of cultural perception. The Alonso Ballet attracts to it largely Cubans of obvious European ancestry; the modern dance company betrays a predominant Euro-African type, and the *conjuntos folklóricos* are largely black-skinned....The Cuban situation is clearly a function of the persistence of "the plantation" in Cuban life (Nettleford 1978: 28 - italics added).

Yet, there is evidence that carriers of the *rumba* dance tradition receive a high degree of emotional and financial support from their audiences and their government. Daniel tells us,

The most frequent setting of rumba today is in prearranged performances by professionals, i.e., in secular rituals....By *professionals*, Cubans mean performers who earn their living by dancing, who perform regularly as dance specialists, and who have been formally trained....The Cuban government supports the arts by paying specialists (in dance, music, theater, or plastic arts) to work daily at their discipline (1995: 92).

She also reports,

In Cuba, "traditional" dancers are specialists in folkloric dance traditions....The Ministry of Culture classifies these groups as traditional, *aficionados*, or amateurs - a special category of amateurs. (Some company members have employment besides dance; however, many do not have part-time employment; they practice and perform as representatives of Cuban folklore (1995: 94).

Williams (1958), Dunham (1983) and Emery (1988) have offered more or less detailed surveys of the field of Caribbean dancing. More personal accounts of danced experience may be found in Deren (1953) and Dunham (1969). What sets Daniel apart from these writers is her contemporary anthropological approach; her choice to delve deeply into many facets of one dance form. By avoiding a more superficial, generalized approach, Daniel has managed to weave elements of her personal experience into an anthropological investigation that includes historical information.

It is clear from the outset that aside from a similar rhythmic pattern in the music, Cuban *rumba* bears little resemblance to the social dance known as 'rumba' that many learned in the United States in ballroom dance studios. The denutiated, whitebread version of 'Cuban motion' is sedate compared to the passionate and provocative pelvic thrusts of the "ritual vaccination" (*vacunao*), variations of which are performed by the male *rumba* dancer that are skillfully, yet flirtatiously, avoided by his female partner (Daniel 1995: 69).

Daniel's book opens with vivid, compelling descriptions of two typical *rumba* events: one in the context of a formal rehearsal conducted by the professional dancers of the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional* at the company's Havana studio; the other a more informal performance in an outdoor setting in the town of Matanzas. These narratives alone make her book worth its sale-price. That is not to say that what follows is any less valuable.

Later sections of *Rumba: Dance and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba* give comprehensive examples of the songs and instrumental music that are inseparably tied to the *rumba* dance complex, including musical notation of the most prominent percussion rhythms. Likewise, Daniel is to be commended for an Appendix which consists of Labanotated examples of the three primary components (*yambú*, *guaguancó* and *columbia*) of the complex.

The Labanotation in the appendix was notated in 1989 by Luana Silverberg-Willis, a dance graduate student, and checked by Maryann Kincaid, a Labanotation Bureau certified teacher. Sharan Arslanian (also a certified Labanotation teacher) transcribed the notion in 1994 onto a computer using Labanwriter, supplied by the Ohio State University Dance Notation Bureau Extension (Daniel 1995: 174).

In the best of all possible worlds, movement literacy would be much more widespread than it is. All dance scholarship would display proficiency in movement-writing and reading. Daniel and other anthropologists of the dance are to be thanked for recognizing the importance of such valuable evidence.

Readers may ask, "Are there any flaws in Daniel's book?" In one section, I experienced confusion regarding what the author meant when she described the qualities of energy used in *rumba* performances. While terms such as "swing energy", "bound flow" and "sustained energy quality" (1995: 77-78) may be clear to users of Laban's Effort-Shape vocabulary, they are of little use to readers who don't know that system, and, one wonders how the vocabulary fits (or 'matches') Cuban designators of movement qualities. More detailed explanations and the folk definitions of energy quality would have been helpful. This is a relatively small complaint when measured against the clarity of Daniel's overall descriptive powers.

The author observes, "The rich wholeness that I and other dancers and spectators often experience, i.e. that which the dance contains, is often lost in written analyses" (1995: 24). While it is true that a book is not a dance, writing about dances shouldn't be unfavorably compared with live performances. No one apologizes for the fact that the musical score of, say, *The Hallelujah Chorus*, or an in-depth discussion of its meanings isn't a live performance. Why should we apologize for literacy and/or scholarship regarding dance forms?

Daniel suggests intriguing relationships between *rumba* and the Cuban *Santería* religion which are touched upon briefly but not thematically developed in this volume. I was disappointed until I learned that the subject will be addressed in the author's next book, currently in progress (personal communication); thus readers may look forward to another installment from an additional perspective, enriching our awareness even more.

Recently I attended a performance of the *Conjunto Afro-Cubano* in New York City which included examples of the three principal constituents of the *rumba* complex: *yambú*, *guaguancó* and *columbia*. It was at that performance that the need for high calibre scholarship in the form of books about dance forms became abundantly clear. Daniel's book enabled me to *understand* - to perceive what the *rumba* dancers were doing in ways that would have been otherwise impossible.

And that brings me to another and final comment about Daniel's admirable book. She says, "It is by dancing that one can fully understand dance" (1995: 21), a rather *cliché* statement which evokes friendly argument. I

have never danced *rumba* and cannot say whether I might attempt doing so in the future, but my *understanding* of the performance I saw (and any others I might see) was comprehensive (I could almost say 'complete'). Such understanding was the result of reading Daniel's book, not the ability to perform.

Note:

¹ Katherine Dunham is widely credited with having established the principles of teaching Caribbean dancing, when in fact, her technique includes only a few of the complex, polyrhythmic movement patterns in Caribbean dances within an essentially American modern dance technique. Similarly, Lavinia Williams's warm-ups were a mixture of ballet and modern dance techniques followed by Haitian dances. It is somewhat like an actor "warming-up" by rehearsing English poetry, grammar and vocabulary for a drama in which a different language is required.

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