Visiting Cuba’s Ballet
July 20, 2012

I just finished my last class with Migdalia, my methodologies instructor, which officially completes my participation in the summer conservatory at the Ballet Nacional de Cuba located in the Vedado neighborhood of Havana. I am contemplating walking home in the heavy summer rain although here at the ballet I can watch the company rehearse and wait it out. Alicia was taken to her next appointment or perhaps to her home before the rain started to fall, which is for the better because the rain was entering the facility and encroaching toward her office. When I decide to finally leave, I kiss the viejita who stands guard at a desk in front of Alonso’s office and I tell her I’ll be back next summer.

This is an excerpt from the daily journal I kept during my first trip to Cuba. I am a third-year graduate student in the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at UCLA and I study the phenomena of ballet on the island. By the end of the fall term I hope to have completed my master’s thesis and by spring I will be taking my qualifying exams. This is an important year. Aren’t they all?

What is satisfying about beginning my field research in Cuba was the opportunity to meet the people whose reality I respectfully and carefully aspire to document in collaboration with. It is one thing to create a historiography of the Ballet Nacional as a cultural institution, but it is a privilege to meet, talk with, and make acquaintances with the persons and literal bodies whose labor constitutes the institution.

For three weeks in July I studied alongside an international cast of dancers seeking to learn the technical and stylistic form of Cuban ballet. I ate my meals with company dancers, ticket sellers, pianists, set painters, costume mistresses, and other production administrators. And every day I saw Alicia Alonso. At 92 years of age, Alonso is rehearsing the company and attending the theater, greeted by standing ovations. Some afternoons I would find myself standing next to the peeling shutters of the main rehearsal space, and gaze upon the most elegantly dressed woman I saw in Havana.

Andy Martinez