

Susana Arenas Pedroso

Hi to everyone. First of all, I'd like to thank CubaCaribe, Isabel Estrada for giving me this opportunity, a spectacular dancer who lives in New York, and Juliana Romano, this beautiful latina, another tremendous dancer who dances with Arenas Dance Company. My name is Susana Arenas Pedroso. I'm from La Habana, Cuba and for part of my childhood I was with my parents and for part of my youth I was raised in Matanzas and then finally I returned to La Habana. I am a director, choreographer, dancer and master teacher of Arenas Dance Company. I arrived to the United States in the year 1998 to stay and since then I have been a master teacher and am totally dedicated to my culture which I adore so much.

What is exceptional about your training as a dancer in Cuba?

My training as a dancer in Cuba was not easy. We all know that Cubans are a dance-loving, musical people, and that we have a culture of firm discipline when it comes to music and dance. So, I was not privileged in this way. Everything that I am I owe to my great sacrifices, my great effort throughout all these years. I also owe a great deal to my parents. I inherited this from my father, he was a musician and dancer, as well as my grandmother and my aunts. Part of who I am is because of them.

Why did you come to the United States? What opportunities came about so that you could come?

That's a great question. First of all thanks to life, to Oloddumare, to God. I was given the opportunity to come to the United States twice. I never asked for it. It was a surprise for me because honestly - we all know the extremely difficult situation between these two countries. I had the opportunity to have a relationship with a man that loved me very much during that time and thanks to him every day for giving me the opportunity to arrive here to the United States. What was it like returning to Cuba for the first time after so long? Beautiful, sad - because I had never left my country before and they were really impactful experiences. It was beautiful to see my mother in the airport. I felt longing to see my friends, I longed to go back to that rhythm of rehearsing every day. I missed all of that. I missed the cannon firing at 9pm that we all know - those of us that live in Centro Habana. I missed the cañonazo, soupy rice. I even missed the difficulties of life in Cuba - but that's also why we are a great people, because we have known how to grow in the face of hardship. But yes, my return to Cuba was very beautiful.

What are some challenges and advantages of being a folklore artist in the United States?

Firstly I would say that there is a great difference between being an artist in Cuba and being an artist in the United States. Cuba gave me intelligence, wisdom, taught me sacrifice, my work ethic, and the United States opened its doors, gave me routes, paths, it gave me independence. Being an artist in Cuba you have to get up early, and be very dedicated. And if you're a dancer you dance, if you're a singer you sing, you have to perform in your specialty. But to be an artist in the United States you have to sacrifice and face many challenges - you need a name. We all know that here to make a living as an artist is extremely difficult. And to maintain yourself as an artist for over 20 years you have to have a great deal of passion, love and dedication.

So what is more difficult, being an artist in the United States or in Cuba?

At this point I think it's harder here. Because as I mentioned, here you have to seek out work, you have to pay rent. You have to do a lot outside of just practicing and teaching your art form. You have to promote your own classes, get your name out there, promote your culture, promote your family heritage, and all that is sacrifice. Though others might say differently, I say it is more difficult to be an artist here in these times than it is in Cuba.

With your 20 years of experience as an artist in the United States, if you could change something about your experience as a dancer, artist, Cuban, immigrant in the United States, what would you change?

As an artist, dancer I would want to change the relationship between the two countries. The tensions between Cuba and the United States are very difficult on us artists and on all Cuban immigrants. In my case I had an opportunity to leave but I had to leave definitively, that was the only option and at that time the relations were even more tense. We all know that in the 1990's the situation between the countries was really tense, it still is tense so what I would want to change is for there to be an understanding between the two governments. So that in Cuba there could be more work, so that Cubans could travel with the money that we work so hard for, so that we could visit any country, just be, have peace, harmony. Because all of these problems affect an artist's creative process. It's painful.

What has been your experience as an artist during a pandemic?

This pandemic, I'm telling you it's rough, it's challenging the whole world. It's a Global pandemic! But this pandemic is teaching us humans and teaching all the governments that it's time to regenerate, to change our mindsets, to take care of the planet, to be more humane, to love each other, to realize that material objects are not so important.

It's more important to spend time with family. It's important to live in the moment. I would say we have to be positive, we have to have a lot of faith. And I believe that this will eventually end but for now we have to get used to it - everything's going to be video, internet...this is a little hard for me because I'm not used to it, but this is what it is for now. It's what it is.

What message do you want to transmit with your art?

Wow! With my art, with my dance...it's a message of love, passion. It is a legacy that I leave, especially when it comes to Afro-Cuban Folklore. It takes a lot of dedication. Sometimes you don't have money, sometimes you don't have a lot of students and you have to keep moving forward, with joy, with a smile, a lot of positivity. My message is to keep moving forward, to unite the arts, to continue because art changes your life, changes your heart, and that is what I am, my sacrifice. I give thanks to all the teachers in my life, like Luis Chacón Aspirina, Juan de Dios Ramos, Judith Justiz, Luis Vergara, Andrés Gutiérrez, Sara Leiva, Jose and I give thanks to many musicians like Eduardo Agüero, José "El Sucio," Miguelito Bernal, Freddy, to many musicians who were in my life as well, they all helped in my formation as an artist and especially thanks to the company Raíces Profundas. I thank them for teaching me so much and that is why I am who I am. And that's my legacy. Thank you very much. Blessings for all and union, peace and love. Thank you.

Román Díaz

Good afternoon. My name is Román Díaz. I was born on the 23rd of February in 1963 in La Habana, Cuba. I am a folkloric musician, a percussionist. And here we are!

What is your first memory of music?

Well, I was lucky to have been born in a neighborhood where music is a fundamental part of life. And next to my house there was a social club where many parties were thrown and the best groups of the time performed. And during that time - 1963 - was the height of the Mozambique - a rhythm with a strong drum base. And I was able to hear these amazing groups right next door. So the first impression that I had - I can't remember it because I was born there. They say that if you play music for a child inside his mother's womb he can recognize it later on. I guess that's what happened to me since I have remained trapped by the magic of the drum.

How did your environment shape you as an artist?

Many of the people who were, and continue to be, my teachers are people who live by their art. They are what they do. And that's what I have tried to be. That's the advice I follow.

What is the power of folkloric music?

Folkloric music has at its foundation in a particular philosophy. Yoruba music, to name one example, has its philosophy of paying homage to the ancestors. And I believe that is one of the fundamental aspects of this type of genre, of folklore. Since the genre of folklore always maintains contact with the ancestors, it can never lose its way. And that is what is fundamental. For the dancer, the singer and the percussionist. *So you could say that this form has become artistic but that it comes from religion.* Of course. The theatre - as Fernando Ortíz wrote - the theatre of black folk. So in all these manifestations, from Congo to Yoruba to Carabalí, there is always a story behind what is being presented. And who would know that better than you, as you have worked with the professor Danys and you have been in Cuba with Raíces Profundas. So you better than anyone know what I'm talking about.

And do you have an opinion as to whether bringing folkloric dance and music to the stage has added or taken away from folkloric traditions?

No no no, definitely not. I already told you that the people with whom I had the opportunity to nourish myself artistically were people who lived within the religious cosmology and also participated in the arts. And the level of knowledge about these manifestations has worked in crescendo alongside the youth.

In your opinion does one have to be religious in order to be a folkloric dancer or musician?

Well...some have the opportunity to practice the religion and others don't have the need to. All of that depends on the destiny of each person.

Changing the subject a bit.. Under what circumstances and why did you come to the United States?

Well...I had the opportunity to be included in a selection of Rumberos that was made by the Esquina Habanera - the group of the Esquina Habanera of Antonio Zequeira. This club was on Summit and 14th Street in Union City. So we were invited, and since we were here we started working with people who had always been idols like Orlando Ríos "Puntilla," Michele Rosewoman and that's why we're here.

What was it like to return to Cuba for the first time once you were living here?

It's simple because after 24 hours you don't remember that you ever left. Just that. Once you get there, in 24 hours, that's it, you never left. Simple.

What has been your experience as an Afro-Cuban Folklore artist in the United States?

For me it's very important - because there have been Cuban folklore artists in the United States for ages. From the times of Chano Pozo until now. And for me it has been very important and very joyful. And it has been an experience of much learning. As we mentioned before, artists such as Chano, Patato (Valdés), Cándido (Camero). They created a path that unites folklore and jazz. And that is a great opportunity that we have been able to take advantage of. And that has served as a lesson to us, of course.

Do you believe that jazz and Cuban folkloric music have a natural connection that serves in the fusion of these two forms?

Indisputably. Because after the events in Haiti, we have the immigration of Haitians to the eastern part of Cuba, as well as to New Orleans, and that is a natural communication that exists.

Do you feel that you developed more as an artist in Cuba or here in the United States?

I have been a very lucky person when it comes to the artistic arena. Especially because I have had the possibility *quemar etapas* (burn through phases). By that I mean I have worked with amazing master teachers and amazing groups. And each group is a school in and of itself. And I don't really know how to respond because there are those that make goals for themselves and those that enjoy the journey and in my case I have enjoyed the journey.

Can you mention a few examples of the groups and master teachers you have worked with?

We were in the amateur group of the Cultural Center of La Habana Vieja with the master Tomás Valdés, with whom we worked in the amateur arts festivals, in rumba groups such as the Cariloy de Luyano, in the comparsas the Marqueses de Atarés, the Compedores de Batea, the Grupo T con E, the Orquesta Sublime, the group Saoco Son of the master Crespo. I also did substitute work at the Cabaret Tropicana thanks to Alfonso Aldama, and of course, one of the universities, to put it that way, Yoruba Andabo with Merceditas Valdés, and the whole range of work that it entailed. And here, the group (Oyu Oro) of the professor Danys, that is one of the really important things because it brings me back to the beginnings of my career. What I mean is that I started as a percussionist in a folklore group and then once I got here I had the opportunity to play jazz, but we also have the opportunity to work in music for dance and for the theatre. Ashé!

Do you find it difficult to maintain Afro-Cuban folkloric traditions, that come from Africa, are Cuban, to maintain them here in the United States?

No because the Yoruba philosophy is by nature universal. It is a seed that will germinate in any plot of land. *What has been your experience as an artist during the pandemic?* It's only that we don't have access to the streets. But with advancements in the cyber world, we have been able to stay in contact with our colleagues. And during this new cyber era, we have been able to learn about new apps and work has continued. *Last question.*

What is the message you want to transmit with your artistic work?

Well. For me it's difficult to respond from the individual perspective because when I go to work, I put myself at the service of the group or project. So the expectations are in accordance with the vision of the work. So I just try to do my job well. *But you are also a director. You have your own projects.* Yes. But, like I said, that notion of individualism is very difficult for me. Hey, I want this, I want that... I'm used to working as a collective. So what we want with a project is not only dependent upon me, it depends on the collective and the possibilities available for the project. It's a little hard for me to respond to questions that relate to me as an individual. *Sorry, now I'm kind of improvising. But have you ever felt that it's really hard to work in folklore, let me try something else. Or have you always known you would stick with your music.* Well we're back to the beginning. The people from whom I have been nourished artistically are people who just are. For me it's not hard because, first you are, and then, well...and because I am, I don't have any problems, really, I don't.

Danys “La Mora” Pérez

Good afternoon. My name is Danys Pérez. Artistic name “La Mora.” Cuban. Afro-Cuban. I am a master teacher, dancer and choreographer in the world of Afro-Cuban culture.

What is your first memory of dance?

Well. I remember that when I was 5 years old, there was a festival in my neighborhood. The Carnival in Santiago is among the most popular in Cuba. It is the tradition that within a neighborhood three girls are chosen to be the “little stars” of carnival. That was my first experience in the artistic world. Then we moved to a new neighborhood, and once again I found myself in a strong cultural center that housed various Cultural Community Centers. And I began dancing at these centers at 6 years of age - popular dances of Hispanic-Cuban origin like cha cha chá and mambo and then at 11 I first encountered folklore.

How did your city or country of birth form you as an artist?

It’s no secret that Cuba is a country with deep cultural roots and that is part of the idiosyncrasy of the Cuban people. So in every neighborhood you can find joy, a cultural scene, an oral culture that is also festive as in the case of a *wemilere* (religious celebration). And of course my parents danced - never professionally - but they danced at social gatherings. So I think it comes from being Cuban, from having been born in such an amazing, culturally rich, carnivalesque neighborhood. It comes in my blood because I love to dance. And that was the influence, from my neighborhood, my neighbors, my parents, and the whole cultural movement present during my upbringing.

In your opinion, what is the power of Cuban folkloric dance?

When we speak of Afro-Cuban folkloric dance we are talking of one of the deepest roots within the formation of the nationality of the Cuban. Cuba is composed of two strong cultures, African and Hispanic, in this case Spain along with some hints of French influence. So when you speak of the African aspect, you are speaking of Cuban identity. So, to be an artist, master teacher, a person within the world of folklore, is to represent that half of Cuban identity that comes from Africa, that huge continent. So folklore is strong like Africa is strong, as are all Afro descendent cultural movements. It is the root, it is information, idiosyncrasy, humanity, it is power, simply power.

Under what circumstances and why did you come to live in the United States?

Let me say it like this. Many immigrants who come to this country say that they come looking for the “American Dream.” I feel very thankful for the open-armed welcome with

which this country has received me but I did not come here looking for any “American Dream.” In my case, I already traveled to the United States in the 1990’s as a cultural exchange artist. So I already knew the country. I came, worked and would return to my country, Cuba. But I fell in love. I fell in love with a Jazz musician. We formed a family, and this is what brought me to the United States. Love brought me, family unity brought me and there were other factors as well. I really enjoy African-American culture. I believe that there are many shared elements between African-American and Afro-Cuban culture - really between all African descent cultures on this continent. But what really brought me was love.

What has been your experience as an Afro-Cuban folklore artist in the United States?

For me being a folklore artist is a blessing. It is a joy. It was a personal decision. The United States has provided me with a great deal of support. It has offered me many opportunities to be able to realize, expose and express my culture. Yes. But it is difficult because, not just Afro-Cuban folklore, but folkloric genres in general, traditional dance forms, are at a disadvantage when it comes to many of the opportunities provided to artists. Perhaps it is because these genres are less familiar or considered less orthodox, unless they are popular or contemporary - though I consider that folklore is also contemporary. There are always difficulties when it comes to being chosen for limited resources. But actually I have received a great deal of support and opportunity - not everything that I desire of course. I keep fighting for art from art. And though it’s difficult, because I have to say that it is difficult, I feel that I have been able to cultivate Afro-Cuban folklore in the United States.

Have you felt more challenged as an artist in Cuba or the United States?

Challenges are everywhere and in oneself. I think that the challenges are different. In Cuba...everything I am and everything that I do is Cuban folklore. So when you’re in Cuba where this is the genuine art form, where you find the experts, the specialists, the origin of this culture, the pressure is strong because you are obligated to do things in a respectful manner, authentically. And sometimes the pure art form does not permit much modification or free expression if it is to be maintained autochthonous, authentic. Here in the United States there is a lot of competition. I don’t project my art in a competitive manner. I prefer an educational, compassionate, humanitarian, harmonious projection. So the challenge here is to introduce my art in bodies that are not Cuban to an audience that is not Cuban. An audience from a different culture, and one that does not always have knowledge of Cuban culture. Meaning that the mode of expression, the vocabulary has to be much clearer. It always has to be clear, but it also depends upon the audience. So the challenge here is to be able to instigate the process of transculturation of this culture and do it in the most genuine way without allowing it to be

misinterpreted by a public so different from the Cuban public. In Cuba I have the Cuban audience which naturally understands, though here we have another challenge - which is to bring oral culture to the stage, which entails an artistic projection. So that in itself is a challenge. So here in the United States I work harder in one way and in Cuba I work harder in a different way.

What has been your experience as an artist during the pandemic?

The pandemic is a dark episode. Difficult for all but worse for artists because we performing artists are artists for the public. What I do is for people to people. I need a theatre, I need people to be able to work. And that's been the worst part of Covid-19. Isolation, the obstruction of social life. And we performing artists, depend on that, our prosperity depends on that social contact. I'd also like to say that apart from all the darkness, disgrace, difficulties of this time, there has also been light. Because things were learned, concerning unity. Now we are in this other stage - this virtual life where the artist can continue to create and maintain identity and reach her public in a different way. So, what can I say, it's been challenging. It's been darkness, but for me also light and hope at the other side of the door.

What message do you want to transmit with your artistic work?

Well this message is more horizontal - it's so broad. But I would say, I am a dancer, I am a master teacher, I am a choreographer out of love. Love for life, love for movement, love for social conscience, love, love love of everything. My work is artistic but with a mission to educate, to form, to clean the world of ignorance so people can live with the power of knowledge which in the end is what liberates us, it's what educates us. And all that I can channel through my work. Talk of history, we have a strong new generation and it is imperative that they know their history, we have an ancestral history. It's important that what our children don't receive at school be taught to them through culture and community. There is much information that school cannot provide but that makes up part of universal history, because it is multi-cultural. So that is my mission. Also, as a folkloric dancer, to create opportunities for our genre. So traditional dances can access greater opportunities within the world of dance. Because sometimes by virtue of being traditional dance it is not given the same attention as other forms. I'm not complaining, I'm commenting. So that is what I try to manifest with my work - humanity and lots of love.

I would love to share with you a fragment of a work that I created in 2019. I returned to Cuba - as I always do - and I have maintained a professional relationship with the company that gave birth to me and formed me and with the artists not only from my city, Santiago de Cuba, but across the whole island, in La Habana, Camagüey and Holguín.

So I was invited to choreograph the show for the 60th Anniversary of the primary company of its style in Cuba - Cutumba. The premier was of a work I have called Siete Mares (Seven Oceans). I had premiered this work with my company Oyu Oro here in New York. But it was not a second run, it was a new premier because this show was reworked for a professional company of the caliber of the international company, Cutumba. Why the name Siete Mares? Well it's obvious that Yemayá is very important in my life as in the life of many. My work is always in the service of exalting the ancestry and lineage of African culture and of course the various ethnicities that arrived in Cuba. The Yoruba culture of the Orishas is one of the strongest and most popular of those that arrived in Cuba. It is like an *oriki*, a celebration of the deity of the ocean. And the seven paths of this deity. And in this *oriki* the deity of the Ocean is accompanied by Eleguá, first Orisha of the trilogy and also Obatalá, father and owner of the head. The work is very interesting because, sometimes we are accustomed to witnessing conflict within folklore works, but the strength of this work is love, feminine strength. This is important, the woman is fighting, feminine strength. And what I wanted to do was provide more information about this deity, that our public, Cuban and non-Cuban could gain deeper knowledge of the deity of the ocean, the Holy Virgin of Regla, known in our Yoruba religion as Yemayá.