

# Ginger Danto

## *BOMBA*

I first encountered Bomba in Puerto Rico, where it is indigenous to the scattered coastal cities to the north, from the time of the slave trade, and the immersion of a strong African presence on the island. Bomba is a highly agitated, rhythmic dance to a variegated drumbeat, and, in a reversal of much dance tradition, it is the dancer whose moves direct the rhythm, rather than the music informing the dance. Ultimately Bomba is like a very heated, albeit courteous conversation, that begins and ends with a mutual salutation between dancer and drummer, but in between leaves room for much repartee. When done well it is spellbinding. When done by a novice unfamiliar with the classic steps and stances, it is merely like watching someone have fun, which in Puerto Rico is a viable, even encouraged, form of entertainment. For all its formative discipline, Bomba is also just a good time.

I had been staying in the town of Aguada, the smaller neighbor to the more sizeable city of Aguadilla (which claims one of the islands' busier airports), when I was first invited to a Bomba evening or *Bombazo*. It was on the occasion of a benefit for a local animal welfare group, where the money raised from a catered dinner (*Bombazo* are often held in venues serving food and drink,) went not to the musicians but to the cause. Preparations began late in the day, and after the program – a dog parade, a buffet of *platos typicos*, - the show got underway.

Another key component to Bomba events is the singer, or group of singers, which functions somewhat like a chorus, offering a sometimes lively, sometimes plaintive-toned narrative, that lends the performance an acceding mood. The essence of these songs is their refrain, which, repeated and repeated, underscores the basic simplicity of the dance, which is comprised of but a handful of steps. It is up to the dancer – in this case a soloist - to provide his or her own embellishments. Finally there is the costume, which, for women, consists mainly of a ruffled, petticoat- style skirt, made of white or brightly colored cotton or *madras*. In the course of the dance, the garment becomes a kind of prop, not unlike the fan unfurled and snapped in

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flamenco. For example, a Bomba dancer will gather the hem of her skirt, swaying it to and fro to emphasize or announce her movements to the musicians. .... At the height of an especially frenetic sequence called a *piquete*, she may rustle the material furiously in front of her, arching her body back, as if to say to the drummer, ‘I’ve really had enough of you’ in impassioned Bomba idiom. When she returns to an erect posture and lowers her skirt, she is once again all reserve and grace, and the audience applauds the lively rendition of an emotional journey. This relationship with the public recalls another popular Latin spectacle – the bullfight - where the dialogue is not only between the bull and the torero, but the duo in the ring and the crowd in the bleachers. Bomba and bullfighting find their commonality in both being rousing spectator sports, with an often intent and exuberant audience.

A singer at the *Bombazo* I attended was a woman named Sandra, who worked at the facility where I was staying, where she was called on to

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give impromptu concerts for group celebrations. At that time Sandra would explain that her roots, as a Puerto Rican black woman, led her to learn some of the traditional repertoire of African slaves, who were brought to Puerto Rico in colonial times to work the sugar cane fields. Though her songs went untranslated, the raw, acapela renditions resonated with all the pathos and strife of a life of servitude, and uncannily brought alive a remote period in island history. One sensed themes of hope and despair intermingled with resignation, and ultimately prayer for some redemptive future. Puerto Rico is a deeply religious community, but each individual knows he faces God alone. While the themes of Bomba are often more domestic – about relationships gone awry and loves unrequited - and the music tends to be upbeat, the sad strains echoing somewhere in the mix are evocative of a deeper existential meaning. It is after all said that originally plantation slaves used Bomba to communicate during the rare festivals they were allowed away from the eye of the master. Thus Bomba was born not just as a dance form, but as a coded language for an oppressed people. Who knows but that some part of liberty may be traced to the conspiratorial messages that passed among those plotting to be free.

As the animal welfare event was a popular one, there was a full coterie of singers, which each one taking turns, like Sandra, to sing lead. Meanwhile several musicians were stationed behind their variously-sized drums - originally rum barrels or *barriles* – the instrument of choice for Bomba. This particular evening coincided with Halloween, and many participants were dressed in elaborate costume, lending their turn on the dance floor a more spectacular effect. But there is no discrimination in Bomba – once under way, the protocol is to allow all present to take their turn – young, old, men, women, even children if they are not too shy. Generic skirts are provided for ladies to slip over their clothing while men dancers go as is, hanging onto their belt loops. Somewhere along the way the band takes a break – but the evening lasts until the last dancer has had their chance. In this way Bomba remains altogether democratic, and part of the charm is that you never know what, or who, you will see.

The next months' *Bombazo* I attended was at a small, street side vegan restaurant in Aguada called *Zona Natural*, where the outdoor porch served as makeshift stage. Proceeding the evening, a lesson in rudimentary Bomba was given by a young woman who works as a waitress by day, but whose heart – and dancierly talent – lie in Bomba. Her name is Leslie Valle, and in her off hours she runs a group called *Taller de la Isla* that performs at area *Bombazo*. As we were a mixed bag of students to show up for class, Leslie offered a bilingual version, slipping between her native Spanish and a heavily accented English to explain both the Bomba's rich history and its elemental steps.