

## **We, Dancers**

**By Resurrección Espinosa**

*I 'm pissed*, Maritza snarled from beneath a tangle of dyed, dirty blond hair. Fat Alberta and the boys nodded. All were in varied stages of semi-decoration, in preparation for the show at the ArtSpace -- not The Palace Theater, but still, downtown big time. The Latino Mangoes could be organized, but only if glory were on the horizon. Other invitations had come their way, but their hearts just could not beat to those cheap knocks. If I asked them to show up at Centro de la Fraternidad and dance for the celebration of poet Julia de Burgos' birthday, they would consent, but then say they couldn't find the place. Or that they had gone somewhere else and I wasn't there. A few others had showed up three hours early in case they could see me then, and since they couldn't, had gone to Burger King to eat something, skipping the occasion entirely. Fat Alberta's mother wanted to show The Mangoes off in the multicultural celebration at her little daughter's school, but only two of them appeared, late, and then improvised. The woman could not forgive them.

But an invitation to perform even once at The Palace, or for my Christmas play at the Square One Downtown Association, would have them dancing and dieting from daybreak to sundown. When I came into the Winthrop Center, I bumped into a few of them, stretching and going obsessively over the same step eleven times, twisting and shaking to music coming from a tiny CD player plugged in the hallway outside *Teen Affairs*, where Maritza and Fat Alberta worked after school. Since Maritza was the boss I asked her to come and see me into the big ceramics room where I rehearsed with the actors whenever they showed up. “*¿Te guhta como me pinté 'l pelo p'ál show?*” She asks me, taking off the headband and letting the messy dirty blond hair float. Fat Alberta blows at long, purple-and-gold nails and points them

my way. The boys say they got blue and red shirts, nice shiny ones. They sit at the far end of the long table, eyes lowered. Only David is doing some thinking at all beyond the shirts. “Éhhhto,” he always starts this way. He wants me to know he thinks, all of them think, what a wonderful thing I’m doing, keeping the kids off the streets, with all those drugs going around and stuff.

I thank them and they get more serious, their eyes on me now. “*I don’t think we’re going to be able to do the dance.*” David springs to his feet. “*¿Por qué, vamos a ver? ¿Por qué?*” Maritza wants to know who said they couldn’t dance, and I tell her. “*I’m sooo mad, oh!, I could-! They are the ones, always. They seem to have something against the Latinos. Siempre pasa así,*” declares David sitting down. A few other things are said, and nobody expects a reply – “*Nobody cares about us. Just like in the high school. Everything for them! But we are going to dance no matter what*”-- and so on.

“*People have to know about this, I want an explanation of why they do these things to us all the time. Nobody complaints but lets things happen.*” We make some promises to each other, and I feel, as we are making them, that they don’t believe in promises, that a promise is like not having the guts to say it like it is and pretending, and a mantle of coldness falls over our gathering, as if it’s all over. But anyway, the dancers have enjoyed some publicity and they want me to call the Hispanic reporter and tell her all about it, and also try again to get the director of Uhuru Arts Center on the phone since (according to that woman named Howley, the community contact for the ArtSpace) she’s the one who called it off. And we would all talk to each other soon. I hear the big hallway doors closing behind the dancers and no more music as I dial the newsroom. We have had many long talks, Lana Lares and I. We have felt we were doing something to clean up the backwardness and corruption around Centro de la Fraternidad by talking about it. That’s a start, right? And by tearing to pieces the actions of Fraternidad’s director, who is fast on his way out. Easy stuff. Lana listens to my

story -- tense, with little wordless *ahás* punctuating what I say. I can hear her breathing in the fear in silence and then asks me why, just as the kids did. I repeat that what I told her is all I know and that I had promised the dancers to call her and – “*Well, I want to hear what the other side has to say.*” There are times when one knows deep in the gut that the other person will not return the call or the love or whatever just as one is giving it, and this is one of those times. Before she hangs up I say *thank you*. Forever.

“*Pero...eso es sólo pá los del Mango, ¿eh? Porque nosotros sí que bailamos. A Bella Boricua no le dice nadie que no baila.*” Helenita appeared as I was hanging up the receiver on the wall phone. She had been there all the time, between the closet and the door, waiting for her rivals, The Latino Mangoes, to go away. I could not understand this rivalry. I knew about it only from comments I would hear while coming into the building, like “*You cannot do that step anymore because Helenita says we stole it from her.*” I would pay David and Anthony to coach Bella Boricua’s dancers, and the girls would not go into the room but watched David dance from the hallway because he was so hot --afraid of what Helenita would do to them if they came closer. No matter how much I said about the young dancers learning from the older ones and doing things together, Helenita believed she was the only one and the best, and her girls stood there, afraid of believing otherwise. “*It’s for everyone, Helenita,*” I say. She has a way of communicating the essence of things with no words, like people who have been through a hard time and have no energy for anything except stillness and silence. Ask Helenita something and she doesn’t even look at you: at the most grunts an “*ahá*” and stares ahead, as if deep in thought. Then she gets up and starts dancing, to show a new recruit how it goes. She’s always acquiring new dancers, losing them. She never explains anything, but asks for things. She wants me to reserve the auditorium for her dances, she wants to know whether I like what she does, she wants people to know that her group is hers and not anyone else’s – not Mangoe’s, not Maritza’s. She would eventually betray and

destroy everything sustaining her now, and her own possibilities --and wouldn't even have a dance to show for it. But that is part of the plan.

It's a wonder we are in this together, but what else can we do? We live in an old town that seems to be falling apart, a town that is being abandoned every minute, a town where many would rather believe we're invisible. The dancers want to do something with their lives beyond avoiding becoming high school dropouts. "*We want to go to New York when we graduate. Anthony is going this summer; he's black, he has connections, he'll be famous when we get there.*" I have heard this before, and never comment on it. Once, long ago, I did say, "*Why don't you want to stay here, create something beautiful for those close to you?*" "*Here? That's what you want to do, stay here?*" They gave me a weird look. Because all is done for love of what is ours, but mainly to leave this place. Or so it's written, over and over --the love part is, at least-- on the survey sheets I prepared for the City Artists Works program, which paid each one of us fifty bucks to collect data in the *barrío*. All the mothers answered the same, and the aunts and the people next door. There were 10 sheets that each person had to fill out to get their money, and I wondered while I read them where the thirst for budding artists in each corner ended and where hand-photocopying started. I can just see them sitting on porches and hanging out from windows and yelling at the dancers, "*Oye, nena, ven acá y dime qué pongo aquí, que no quiero equivocarme.*" But we were supposed to believe what they wrote; otherwise, why be here and do this if we can't believe in ourselves? According to the answers, all the mothers wanted to keep their culture and pass it on to their kids by having theater and dinners with Puerto Rican food and dances: mainly dances and Puerto Rican food. "*And where are your mothers when we perform,*" I ask as I read the survey sheets. Sometimes they had come, the girls say, when they had performed at the Palace Theater. "*Strange,*" I replied, "*that I was not invited.*" And they don't know what to say, because their minds become confused with how to put together the high school and the

Palace Theater and this forsaken place where we meet in the afternoons and what they want to be and what they are and who I am and more. One belongs to a power structure, like school or the Palace Theater, or you are somebody's cousin and because of that you belong, but otherwise you're nobody, and how do you include nobody in your day of glory?

Since they have had a taste of another world, one beyond the projects and Connecticut Avenue, one that might show the way to New York, it is very important for them that I learn who has prohibited them from dancing at the ArtSpace, a place which, until now, has not existed for them, and is suddenly an upsetting mystery soon to disappear from their world. Things start happening, many things. It seems that *they*, who professed to care about us, do not really want us there. We have stumbled onto their turf, and now they have to worry about what people will think and their federal and state funding. I walk through the door of my home after meeting the dancers at the Winthrop Center when the phone rings. It's Alberto Viscoso, the current token Hispanic. It's no longer the "token Puerto Rican," since our Latino population has become so diversified that the director of the Palace Theater asked me one day, "*Who are the Hispanics here – Alberto's group, Gina Bueno-Gross's group – who?*" He may have just been wondering why, after putting Alberto on the Palace's stationary, the man doesn't even show up for board meetings. But then, if Alberto is to be believed, he's on 250 boards, so how could he get to the meetings as well as making it to the letterheads? You may be multiculturally-infatuated, and innocently fall for a Chilean, a Colombian, or a Dominican, not even suspecting that Mr. Ben Garcés, the local token PR for countless organizations for two generations and a half, may feel left out.

*"I just want you to know that I am your friend,"* says Alberto in Spanish. *"That's why I'm calling you. I don't want you to think that just because I talk to some people downtown, they are necessarily my friends, you know."* I don't know what he's talking about, but this happens sometimes with Alberto. He has his own smooth style, and it may take you longer

than it should to realize that you've been taken. Now, with a sweet, practiced, persuasive voice, Mr. Viscoso reminds me of his training in conflict resolution, and that he wants to help to resolve ours. "*What conflict,*" I ask, naive. He says that someone has called him -- he forgets the person's name -- to say that the dancers and I were not really invited to the event, and that we should resolve the issue before anybody finds out. The situation, he adds, should be understood as initiating conversation for the future.

I was worn out and lost my cool. I didn't say big words, but I raised my voice and said, "*Yes, we were invited, and this has happened before. Three times in one year.*" "*It has? When?*" I spoke of the Afro-Cuban play with the middle school kids, including the bilinguals, this year; we were co-sponsors, the arts center and my theater group, and once I had started work on the program *she*, the person in question, had tried to keep the school from releasing the funds. Too late. She then told a teacher and the two workers at the center that I was not to be helped. I could never get her on the phone, just a tape, and all her co-workers knew I was calling. She thinks that she never has to answer for the harm she does. "*We may be talking about different people,*" says Alberto, in a cute tone. "*Could you tell me the names of the dancers and where I could find them?*" No, I can't. Those kids are already confused enough, and *she* is being helped to compound the confusion. Smothering his laughter, Alberto quickly tells me to call him if I remember those names, and hangs up. I felt as if I had been robbed in front of a cheering cop.

I decide that someone must investigate this. Today, the dancers. Two months ago, the play that we were still rehearsing. Last year, the staged reading of *A Raisin in the Sun*. I am happy that El Tolki left for Providence, because he wouldn't have made it here either. I hated to see him go, but I'm sure he couldn't fight this. Once he had met a director of the Children's Agency; she liked the theater he was doing and said it would be great for her children and their foster parents and relatives, asked him to write a proposal to do a show on

bullies. He did. She said they would talk it over with their Hispanic board member; she was truly looking forward to it. That was the end because Alberto doesn't like people doing plays in Spanish and being thanked and appreciated and included. I call the minority reporter, who responds to my account, nervously, "*Come on, Última, you don't believe that you are being discriminated against, do you?*" Now that the question has been asked, I don't want to answer it. It's not the way I think about things, and still the wrong should be confronted without having to put it in a box. He says that he will talk to *her* and a few other people and see. But I know I won't hear from him anymore either. *She* is prohibited territory. I then call the superintendent of schools, who has been helping to promote and fund this program, and tell him what has happened. He groans. "No, *she* can't do that to the kids", he says. He wants me to check with the president of the Uhuru Arts Center's board just to see if what *she* says is correct, that her board of directors decided not to go along with the invitation because I have some male dancers and this is an all women show. He doesn't trust *her* and says that he wants to be as far away as possible from Jill Takefoot Scarfer. I guess that he would rather I resolve the thing myself, like the others.

The president of the board of directors says she knows nothing about this, and adds that the board has not met for a while. Soon after I hang up, the phone rings. It's Val Falsetto, frustrated photographer and manager of the ArtSpace. He starts threatening me, asking whether I have been calling some Hispanic organizations downtown. No, I haven't. "*You haven't? Well. Make sure you don't. It can get you into a lot of trouble because it was our board of directors who doesn't want you here. This has nothing to do with Uhuru's board. Get things straight, hear me? Hear me? And watch out with who you talk to about this.*" Had I still been working on *A Raisin in the Sun* with the Uhuru people before Scarfer stopped the rehearsals, I would have had ready Walter's words to Lindner – *I want to know if you got any*

*more to tell us 'bout getting together?* But a year had passed since I had declaimed those lines, defiantly as the script requires, and I did not now have the focused determination.

The phone rings again, and it's Maritza, Helenita, and one of their dancers, Lourdes, talking from the big ceramics room. Lourdes' father works as a janitor at the Evening News, so she wants to know what's going on. And, will they be allowed to dance? "*Queremos que sepas qu'ehtamos practicando.*" They add that they are practicing together, for the first time. I begin to have hopes for the side effects of this mess -- we may end up sharing thoughts, understanding what happens to us, arriving at answers together. No, I don't have news yet, but is there a number where they can be reached? Maritza doesn't have a phone at home, but Helenita's grandmother has one, and yes, she can be reached there. Helenita's voice has softened. Something has opened her energy channels and she's now more than just muscles, greed, and pain. I hear myself saying that we might resolve this matter, although I don't know why I say that.

But I do know. After all, I am in an enviable situation. All the resources any inner city artist could want and need are at my fingertips. Since I am a member of City Artists Works in the middle of a three-year commitment, which is how I got into this, I call the directors of the program in Hartford to see what might I do. We have been encouraged to find ways of collaborating with one another. The mandatory workshops include the elements of contracts, what happens if you break them – and other aspects of a fair world, which we might be building here. Howley and her assistant at the ArtSpace sit next to me one Saturday morning at the Fine Arts School in Saybrook, where City Artist Works meets that day. They are worried that the mothers/daughters exhibit they are about to open is going to be a drag; could I bring something to make it fun? I tell them about the dancers and my photo exhibit hanging at Fraternity's. They love it. They want to know more, everything; they give me their cards and want me to call them and make an appointment to visit, and they will pay us -- and when

can I move the pictures, and do the dancers have enough money to buy some cute outfits, and all, and all. I tell them I will meet them as soon as my play is over. Scarfer, who sits nearby, gives a start and looks at me sideways with a hostile grin –so, now I was preparing the Afro-Cuban play she thought she had killed three weeks ago! This must not be.

I know that Keesha Kim, one of the City Artist's coordinators, is a friend of Jill Scarfer's. So it's the co-director, Marilou, who hears my story. "*God, how awful,*" she says. She feels so bad this has happened in City Artists that they have to do something about it. She will talk to the director of the Center for Action in the Community and she'll get back to me. Tonight there is a meeting of our regional group in Norfolk, and Marilou thinks I should share the story with the other participants so that it nothing similar happens again, and she will call me back. But she doesn't, and at the meeting Marilou and Keesha and the other coordinator are there, talking with Jill Takefoot Scarfer, hugging, laughing, looking at me with sideways glances, inviting each other to beers afterwards.

There is a week between that regional group meeting and one at Thames College, with speakers from Providence and the woman with a doctorate who directs the Action in the Community program that put us in this situation. Alberto Viscoso is there as the president of an organization nobody knows what it's for, *Our Unity*, which gets funding from a big business in town. He's talking to Keesha Coles; they both laugh, and soon after the thing starts Alberto, dressed in a gray wool suit and tie although the May night is warm, picks up his huge leather briefcase and scurries off. I notice that Jill Takefoot Scarfer is not present, though this is a mandatory meeting, and that the exhibit coordinator at the ArtSpace, Howley, who wanted the dancers and my photographs and worked out the program and wrote the press release and showed me where everything would take place, was sitting close to where Alberto had been and had now her head down, between her shoulders --the one who had been so full of confidence and sharing just the other day in Saybrook.

A friend who works at the newspaper had suggested I share the story with Kevin Robson, a reporter who concentrated on social justice. Robson was impressed, and said he would call Helenita at her grandmother's house; those dancers would get their day of happiness if nothing else, he vowed. That night I could not sleep, a knot pulling tighter and tighter in my stomach. At seven I went out and bought the newspaper. We had made it to a column on the front page of the Region section. At eight, I was in the street, dressed in my best suit, ready to defend myself. Just before I left, I dialed Alberto's number. He was frantic with fear. He knew nothing about any paper, he doesn't read English properly, he doesn't remember talking to me about any dancers, and he hangs up.

When the editor and Kevin Robson and I sit down in the paper's conference room, both realize they have made a mistake. The editor wants to make sure my court case with Thames College has ended, and I get a glimpse of how far Scarfer and Alberto have gone to try to convince the editor and Robson that I was in the wrong. I learned later that the editor had called my friend at the paper with the same question. Hard to believe, I guess, that I am telling the truth when such apparently solid community figures as Jill Scarfer and Alberto, the latter of unknown profession but with powerful connections, are saying otherwise. While we negotiate the space I would receive in the paper to answer Robson's abortion, other people are called in -- editors who have published my articles in the past. All recommend providing me with lots of space.

Days later, at City Artists Works, one of my colleagues says I have defended myself well, pats me on the shoulder. The local New Thames coordinator gives a speech recognizing that some of us have gone through hard times lately, but we have done well. He says that he's happy to announce that some wonderful dancers will be with us at our last meeting at the Griswold Museum in Old Lyme. But this is just personal decency. Whatever happened to the bigger thing, the community action, the City Artists Works as a democratic organization to

bring about... what --justice, change, more grants to Uhuru Arts Center? Howley has taken to smoking at meetings, head lowered, close by the door as if ready to flee at any minute; Scarfer, always giggling but downcast, stays close to Keesha, balancing her heavy body nervously on little heels, and invites her to beers.

I wondered what had resulted from Howley's comment to Robson that she *"had advised her (me) very strongly 'Look, you can't throw terms like racism around like this.'"* She also had told him that it was her decision not to bring us to the ArtSpace. I wonder who's telling the truth – Scarfer, Falsetto, Howley, someone we still haven't heard from. But not really, I don't wonder. Howley continued her story to the newspaperman: *"She approached me with the idea of having the kids dance for 10 minutes and hanging old art. It had nothing to do with what the collaboration was about. She then called Scarfer a dangerous racist."* I wonder... But not really. Scarfer added, according to the paper, that *"It was explained very nicely to her (me) by Howley that we had been planning this for a year. She came to one meeting and started to take over."*

I call Ernie the Panamanian to tell him we are not moving the pictures from Fraternidad's, and he giggles. He knows. Have you read the paper? Everybody has. *"Te dieron un palo. They beat you up,"* he says. Not, "I am sorry." He explains, *"That goes to show you why people don't do these activities. Many can dance and stuff, but they know what will happen to them if they stick their necks out. What happened to you! Nobody will help."*

I have since taken the dancers, in the multiple configurations in which they appear to be each month, or week, to Hartford and New Haven and Manchester and even the Palace Theater. Although after what happened with the ArtSpace the situation has changed, as I guess was the plan. Lourdes left Helenita's group the day the column appeared in the paper, because her father is a janitor there and... The Latino Mangoes, who were having trouble

finding whatever it is that keeps people working together, fell apart, came briefly together for one night at The Palace when Plena Libre sang here for Hispanic Heritage Month. Somebody took a picture of all of us together, and the ceremonial Mayor gave me a plaque that promises this town will celebrate our heritage year after year – “*or at least while I am mayor.*” Helenita started separating from me. Not right away, no, of course. She calculated. Saint Mary’s priest had invited us to dance in the Saint John’s parade down by the river, so when the Costa-Rican nun and her friends at the church told Helenita to show them what we were doing, “*For possible future invitations,*” Helenita showed up at the church without me. It didn’t do her any good; they still didn’t let her dance. There were many ways in which Helenita did us harm, just to show she wasn’t one of us and could be invited --until I didn’t let her participate. And I guess that’s also part of the plan.

Of the three Mango members who stayed with me, intending to teach the middle school kids, Anthony was recruited by Uhuru Arts Center and given a job in its after school program; the rest of us were left out. No explanation. We also lost Mayra, Anthony’s girlfriend, and although she’s Latina she has not spoken to us since.

People ask me whether I still do theater and dance, and I say of course, and they seem surprised. I managed to put a show together in September, and the dancers – other dancers – made it to the front page of the paper. One of the main instigators of our ousting came to see us, Cheryl Stickpole -- who had played a leading part in our exclusion by ArtSpace --, suffered in silence our day of triumph and left without extending that “future” invitation whose preliminary talks the whole region witnessed the year before. I often encounter photographer Val Falsetto at Annie Christie Bar and Grill, and he comes down from his pot haze to try to justify what he did, saying the same thing over and over, forgetting he has said it already, perhaps pretending he forgets and all life for us must be no more than a future possibility. He says, in his shrill voice, “*Hey, listen, as soon as we get the garden ready we*

*should talk about you bringing those dancers; that other time was just preliminary, you know.”* And I say, of course.

On a wind-swept winter afternoon, I walk the central streets of this old town ablaze with icy sunlight that promises spring. We have no need to rehearse this afternoon. The several scenes of our performance are spread out before us that we may understand its meaning, in the life of this town. We have tested the steps, chosen the music and costumes, and engaged the audience. I walk, thinking of the invitation I received today, confident that the ArtSpace and Uhuru Arts Center have received it also. There will be an international celebration in Hartford this summer, *Community-Based Collaborative Research for Social Justice*. The organizers, some of whom I once knew, are seeking submissions from artists, activists, and community partners. They hope to identify and address social inequities and disparities, revealing their root causes. There is a picture of Keesha and the Ph.D. woman delivering a lecture, *Community Development through the Arts: Making the Connections*. Should I suggest to my (former) dancers and actors that we submit a piece for the enlightenment of the researchers?

The event will be at the Hartford Hilton, and I am reviewing our situation carefully to see what portion of our disposable income should be dedicated to this worthy enterprise: Helenita is pregnant and living in an apartment with an aunt who is never home because she's a cleaning lady at Wolfwoods Casino and puts in a lot of hours; her phone number has changed since her grandmother moved to Florida, so it will be hard to reach her. Maritza distributes chips to gamblers at the casino; David is a dealer there and sometimes he and Maritza work the same shift, but he has moved to Norwalk and the two don't hang out anymore. Fat Alberta's mother has gone back to Puerto Rico, and José and his family have moved into the Crystal Avenue high-rise, which is better for the baby's asthma, but José doesn't go to school anymore. One day he sleeps in one apartment and another day in another

one, and his mother says that the morning he turns seventeen she will put his things by the door and kiss him good-bye as a present because she cannot endure his drugs and lying anymore.

If Helenita could take some time off from her baby and her self-absorption and weariness to ask me once more, “*But, are we really invited?*” I would say, yes. Aware that someone may step forward at any minute and say that’s not true. Knowing that the only way to answer would be to stand up and tell our story – and thus taking the first step toward our next performance, which is how we, Latino dancers, could make our place in this Land.

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