

# Wilmian Hernández

Co-Founder of the  
Sarasota Cuban Ballet School



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*But, like so many arts organizations, the Sarasota Cuban Ballet School had to shut down and regroup when the pandemic grew rapidly.*

*They're cautiously and safely back to teaching boys and girls from ages 3-23. The goal is to train aspiring dancers for major ballet companies as Wilmian, and her husband and co-founder Ariel Serrano, have done since 2012.*

**A**pril 2020 seems so far away. It was then that the Sarasota Cuban Ballet School's pre-professional dancers won top honors at Youth America Grand Prix (YAGP) competitions in Salt Lake City, Denver, Indianapolis, and Toronto. But April 2020 also had Covid-19 with 200,000 cases and 4,076 deaths early in the month. By late April the U.S. had over one million cases and more than 57,000 deaths as a result of the pandemic.

Thus, like so many arts organizations as well as businesses, the Sarasota Cuban Ballet School (SCBS) had to shut down and regroup. At SCBS they teach boys and girls from ages 3-23 and many parents (especially those of the youngest ones), not knowing what to do simply removed their children from classes. Then SCBS had to cancel their four scheduled performances.

Now, months later, older students still attend, but overall, the school that had 80-90 students year round, now has 40-45. According to Wilmian, the students age 11 and up are the ones taking classes and the school has put in place rigorous practices like masks and extensive cleaning—the barre, the studios and bathrooms—but also limiting class to just 10 students.

Zoom has proven to be only a so-so way to teach with mixed results. Ballet instruction requires a teacher and a student to have close contact: adjusting the body or an arm for proper technique. And visualize a class of 3-5 year olds all online and you can imagine the challenge.

As for so many arts organization in our area, it's sad to see what was a great start to 2020 come to a painful, near full stop. Sad for SCBS because the students that did so well at those YAGP competitions were denied going to the International Competition in New York where ballet companies attend to spot talent for their companies.

On the day of this interview, Wilmian was preparing to teach a class. Ariel Serrano, her husband, fellow dancer, and co-founder of SCBS, will be teaching a different class. The couple were born in Cuba and danced there professionally for ten years. They met at Ballet Camagüey which was under the direction of Fernando Alonso, who had danced with American Ballet Theater and with his wife Alicia Alonso co-founded the National Ballet of Cuba.

They were on tour in Mexico and on the day they were set to return to Cuba, Ariel received an invitation from Anne Marie DeAngelo, artistic director of Mexico's Ballet de Monterrey. Just married a few months, they parted.

"I had to go back to Cuba to dance with the Cuban National Ballet. Ariel said he would send for me. We had to wait six months wondering if it would happen. Eventually, we found a way for me to return to Mexico where we had an opportunity to dance Swan Lake choreographed by Fernando Bujones. But our dream was to go the U.S. so we went to the U.S. Embassy and asked for asylum. They gave us a six months visa. We left with very little and moved to Miami. We danced in the Miami area doing some school shows and some guesting. We were in Miami for six months. We didn't speak the language. We were desperate and scared. Then one of our friends told us about the Sarasota Ballet holding auditions in Boca Raton. We auditioned for the company's founder, Jean Weidner Goldstein. We were offered contracts and joined the company in 1994," (also the same year the company signed Robert deWarren as its artistic director).

Wilmian took time off to have children and danced as a guest artist with various companies. When she had her daughter, she decided to retired from dancing and started teaching. Ariel suggested they open a school and they did so in 2012. He had

also stopped dancing due to injuries.

Their family includes a son, Francisco, age 24, who studied with his parents and is a rising star in London with The Royal Ballet. He's in his third year in their corps de ballet at that esteemed company. Their daughter Camila, age 20, is also a dancer and has had to put her career on hold since auditions are not taking place. She helps out at the school.

Ballet is a precise and demanding art-form and thus as a teacher Wilmian explains she is strict in her classes, but more relaxed when working individually. By contrast, having attended the prestigious Ballet Nacional School in Cuba (still considered one of the best schools in the world), she says firmly, "In Cuba, you don't relax. Ballet is hard, harder than sports. They [her students] need to be focused." But it's not strict for strictness sake. Teaching precisely and firmly also prevents injuries.

She has a good relationship with her students and sees them more like family. Many are from around the USA and the world and are adjusting to a different culture. "Sometimes I'm like a mother," she explains.

The school has achieved success in that students have joined companies like the Birmingham Royal Ballet in England, Milwaukee Ballet, Ballet San Antonio and the Sarasota Ballet. Older students can rent their own apartment or can stay in the housing that the school offers and they're transported to class by Wilmian's sister.

Students at the school may or may not have aspirations for a career in ballet. Career-oriented dancers—pre-professionals as they're called—attend classes and train every day, often for four to five hours. The other students come in less frequently. The school has three other teachers who, as Wilmian says happen to be Cuban, but adds that you don't have to be Cuban to teach at SCBS.

So what is Cuban Ballet, anyway? She starts by stating that "technique is technique whether it's Russian or English," and explains, "It's the way that we dance that's different." For example in turns - the pirouette - the goal is to stay "in balance" and she adds, "we turn a lot." In the Cuban style, "we increase the difficulty of the classes."

Put simply, she adds a metaphor: "Cuban dance is like a flavor you add to dance." Put another way, if you've ever seen José Manuel Carreño, a former principal dancer with the English National Ballet, Royal Ballet and American Ballet Theatre, dance, you get the idea easily.

For now, it's training the future stars of ballet at the Sarasota Cuban Ballet School. They offer a variety of opportunities for all ages interested in this beautiful artform: after-school study for students in elementary school includes study time along with homework help, as well as daily dance classes. Children's classes for various ages such as ages 3-10 learn movement, self-expression, and creativity. Later, they're introduced to ballet, modern dance and acrobatics.

Ages 10 and older learn ballet technique, advance to pointe, and increase their repertoire. Pre-professionals ages 12 and older are interested in a serious dance program with the possibility of a dance career. Finally, adult classes are for those who have always wanted to take ballet or learn contemporary dance, or are returning after a hiatus, or are former dancers who want to take classes. Adult students are usually between 20 and older than 80 years old.

Wilmian's face and voice express hope that maybe things will change for the better in January, "We're taking it day by day."

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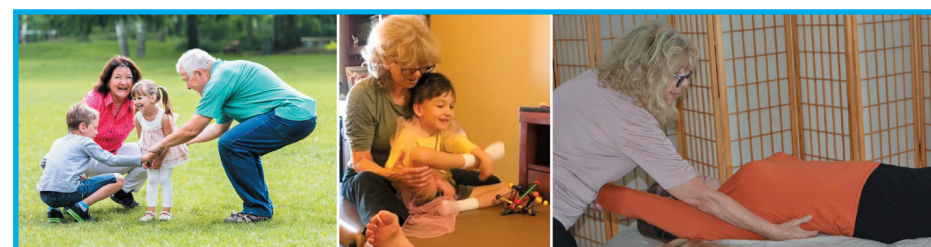
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