
The Vladimir Malakhov Dance Festival Returns to Cuba

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This year, the 2nd Vladimir Malakhov Grand Prix (named after the renowned international dancer) will be offering a series of interesting scholarships to dancers and choreographers in the United States. Paul Seaquist, the festival producer, talks to us about the event.

HT: What changes have been made to the festival this year?

Paul Seaquist: Following the success of our first Vladimir Malakhov Grand Prix and the *Codanza* Grand Prix in September of last year, we realized there was one constant throughout the event: the skill of participants. The artistic and technical talent of the dancers and choreographers who participated in the competition was so impressive, we were completely dazzled.

That is how the idea to support established dance companies (in addition to individual dancers and choreographers) was born. If we're granting awards to and supporting dancers and choreographers as individuals, why not grant awards to and support companies as well? That is why, for this second competition, we developed the Vladimir Malakhov Grand Prix for Companies."

HT: Have Malakhov and yourself come to any decisive conclusion?

PS: The quality of the dancers' movements, the aesthetic and stage choreographies, the creative talent and diversity of choreographic languages used, made us realize that Cuba is no doubt a breeding ground for great talent. We also realized that, until now, much of what's happening at Cuba's eastern end has apparently been "negligently ignored," somehow stricken from the collective artistic awareness of the country.

It was curious for us to be exposed to a kind of creative power whose existence we, and I am sure a great majority of people, are totally oblivious to. We firmly believe that the future of dance – not only in Cuba but also in Latin America – is waiting to be discovered in Cuba's east.

HT: Have the goals of the competition and the Grand Prix changed this year?

PS: I don't think so. The aims continue to be the same ones I set for myself at the first performance in Havana some years ago, when we created "A Gift From Malakhov." In the first place, the aim was to create a platform to develop new dance initiatives in Cuba and to try and make the country's dance offer more attractive for lovers of the art on the island.

The second goal was to impel the development of the discipline in an honest and competitive fashion, on the basis of real and objective incentives, with a view to encouraging young talents most of all. I believe good management boils down to remaining true to the foundational goals, to not making concessions or distorting it through aims other than the original ones. We believe what we're doing is honest, and we will continue to do it.

Vladimir Malakhov giving a class in Holguin, Cuba. Photo: radioangulo.cu

HT: Why encourage this in a country like Cuba?

PS: My counter-question would be: why not? At the risk of repeating myself, I want to stress that the aim of our work is to help others. I think that lending a hand, offering support to someone who needs it, offering unconditional

and (more importantly) selfless support, is something we need, not only in the world of dance, but in the world in general.

In my line of business, I often get to see that hateful and harmful *quid pro quo* that only stands in the way of the healthy and efficient advance of the discipline. Many achievements in the world of dance are attained on the basis of irregularities, of decisions made on the basis of emotions, rather than the objectivity of reason. And that is no doubt a risk.

HT: Will scholarships be granted the winning Cubans this year?

PS: This year, we'll be giving two dancers and/or choreographers scholarships for the world-renowned companies Alvin Ailey and the Joeffrey Ballet. The scholarships are going to be part of a new award we are developing, called the "Paul Seaquist Award." They are for the summer courses offered by these companies. They cover the full tuition and, in the case of Alvin Ailey, lodging expenses are offered as part of the scholarship.

The fact we have two institutions of the stature of Alvin Ailey and the Joeffrey Ballet supporting our initiative demonstrates that our work and vision is being taken very seriously around the world.

HT: What dimensions do you believe this second competition could reach?

PS: This year, we are internationalizing the Vladimir Malakhov Grand Prix and the *Codanza* Grand Prix even more. Last year we saw the participation of talented representatives from Mexico, Venezuela and Uruguay, and this year, we are extending our invitation to performers from around the world. We hope to be able to see talent from Chile, Brazil, the United States, Germany and Japan.

HT: How do you plan on taking the competition to other parts of the world, so that the initiative flourishes beyond Cuban borders?

PS: We have two ways to taking the competition to other parts of the world and we are pursuing both at the same time. Firstly, the call to participate in the second Vladimir Malakhov Grand Prix has been made around the world. This means we are inviting dancers, choreographers and companies from around the world to participate.

Secondly, we are opening new venues for our initiative. On the one hand, we've started holding talks and advancing invitations from Puerto Rico and, through the Malakhov Foundation, we are starting talks to launch the competition in Taiwan in the not so distant future. It is important to stress that all of these initiatives will be undertaken parallel our activities in Cuba. I've said it before and I'll say it again: we made a commitment to Holguin and that is our number one priority.

HT: Is the United States being included as an important source of competitors, following the recent diplomatic changes?

PS: As I've said, our idea is to make the Vladimir Malakhov and *Codanza* Grand Prix as international as possible, without forgetting that our priority is Cuba. Just as we want to see many participants from the rest of Latin America and from Europe, we want this from the United States. This will start happening this year.

The scholarships we're offering are for US companies, in fact. It seems to me – and I say this on my own behalf only – that it is time to tear down the obstacles and eliminate the borders that have brought and continue to bring so much harm to Cuba. My aim is to integrate and help, and to help integrate.

I hope this new opening, this new opportunity to talk, at least, will be feasible and go beyond good intentions, which is where most great projects remain. We need to see how things start and how they end. Hope is the only thing we stand to lose.

HT: How do you see this second competition unfolding?

PS: The Second Grand Prix is going to be a party. For ten days, from September 20 to 30, 2015, Holguin is going to be the venue of an International Dance Festival that is drawing more people every year. Recently, we found out the event was recognized as the Year's Top Cultural Event in Holguin. I have a dream, and that dream is to transform Holguin not only into Cuba's dance capital, but Latin America's dance capital as well. I believe we are

heading in that direction.
