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Alicia Alonso, Cuba's ballet legend, dies at age 98

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(Reuters) - Legendary Cuban ballerina Alicia Alonso, who achieved global acclaim in the 1940s and went on to run the internationally renowned National Ballet of Cuba for decades, died on Thursday at age 98, state-run media said.

"Alicia Alonso has gone and left an enormous void, but also an unbeatable legacy," President Miguel Diaz-Canel said in a post on Twitter. "She positioned Cuba at the altar of the best of dance worldwide. Thank you Alicia for your immortal work."

One of the greatest 20th century ballerinas, Alonso used her star power to make a sometimes elitist art form popular on her Caribbean island, forging the world's largest ballet school with a unique bravura style.

Alonso immediately identified herself with the 1959 revolution and, with her dance partner of many years, Russian Igor Youskevich who died in 1994, performed for the bearded guerrillas of Fidel Castro's rebel army after they took power in Havana. She remained closely associated with the Communist government until the end.

So revered is Alonso in Cuba - where a perfume carries her name and the huge Coppelia ice cream parlor is named after one of her signature roles - that she carried the rare title of prima ballerina assoluta, reserved for only the most exceptional of dancers.

"As the daughter of a small Caribbean island, Alonso confronted all the barriers, those who said

ballet was an art of developed countries, that the Latino physique and temperament could not adjust to the needs of classical dance," Cuban-born Carlos Acosta, former principal guest artist of the Royal Ballet, said in a statement on Thursday.

"Alicia Alonso destroyed all these prejudices when she made her entrance on the stage."

'HIGHEST LEVELS OF EXCELLENCE'

Alonso's breakout role was "Giselle" in New York on Nov. 2, 1943, when she replaced British dancer Alicia Markova, who fell ill, in the newly formed company that would become the American Ballet Theatre.

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