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By Jen Jones

L.A.-based company CONTRA-TIEMPO is making waves with its bold approach to teaching and performance.



Can salsa dance really solve the world's problems? Spend five minutes with CONTRA-TIEMPO's Ana Maria Alvarez, and the idea seems completely plausible. In 2005, the passionate artistic director founded the activist dance company as a natural growth from her master's thesis work at UCLA's Department of World Arts & Cultures. "At the time, I was exploring the idea of using salsa and partner dancing as a way to represent and break down the idea of community and partnership," Alvarez says.

"Simultaneously, I developed an arts education model using dance as a way to help young people understand big ideas and concepts."

Six years later, CONTRA-TIEMPO has morphed into a thriving nonprofit concert dance company with teaching residencies in 25 public schools around Los Angeles. Each residency kicks off with a live performance, followed by a 10- to 20-week curriculum focused on Latin dance, creative writing, poetry and current events. "We start with movement and group-building initiatives to get them comfortable with their own physical voices," says Alvarez. "We use a Cuban form of dancing called rueda, which is an incredible metaphor for how communities work and how individuals are an important part of something greater than themselves."

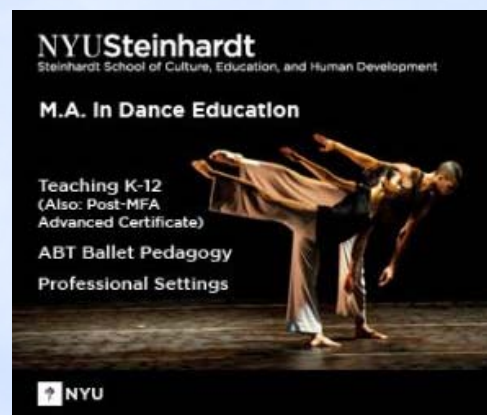
The company's arts education work has resulted in some impactful crossover between student and stage. According to Alvarez, one student penned a Langston Hughes-inspired poem based on her mother's immigration from Guatemala that inspired CONTRA-TIEMPO's 2007 production *I Dream America*. Toured to five cities throughout the U.S., as well as Cuba, Puerto Rico and Mexico, the 40-minute movement opera is a commentary on race relations between Latinos and the black community.

"Our students' voices, ideas and work have been presented in some huge venues," Alvarez says. These include New York's International Fringe Festival and Lincoln Center, Dance Place in DC and REDCAT in L.A. "The mission is to represent voices not traditionally heard on the concert stage and really use dance to transform the world," she adds.

If CONTRA-TIEMPO's rapid growth is any indication, mission accomplished. The arts education program recently expanded to the East Coast as part of a three-year grant, starting with New York's Celia Cruz Bronx High School of Music. In the last year, the company also introduced a summer arts academy for ages 6 to 14, as well as a pre-professional youth company.

The company now tours up to eight times annually, both domestically and throughout Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico and—starting in 2012—Brazil. On September 23, CONTRA-TIEMPO debuts the evening-length work *FULL.STILL.HUNGRY* at L.A.'s Ford Amphitheatre, which Alvarez says is "all about the politics of food—looking at how we consume and how we treat each other, our environment and ourselves."

The common thread through all of CONTRA-TIEMPO's endeavors? Making a statement—as loud as possible. "Our work is activism by nature," says Alvarez. "I



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Based in Los Angeles, Jen Jones is a frequent contributor to Dance Teacher.

Photo: Ana Maria Alvarez (courtesy of CONTRA-TIEMPO)

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