SARGASSO Interview

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“I Have to Feel it First...”: An Interview with Artist Awilda Sterling-Duprey on the Creative Process

Interview by Julia Ritter
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[Note from the Interviewer: During the 2003 NEH Seminar in Caribbean Theater and Cultural Performance, I studied with Awilda Sterling-Duprey in her workshop, Taller de Danza Afro-Caribeña, and witnessed her “Vejigante Decrépito” as a site-specific performance. She is a key figure in Puerto Rico’s contemporary art scene, having influenced younger generations into experimenting and validating their Afro-Caribbean identity. She has received various grants and fellowships for individual work from NEA, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, Instituto de Puerto Rico en Nueva York and Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y El Caribe, among others. She actively teaches and performs, and at present is an adjunct assistant professor at the Sociology/Anthropology Department of Long Island University [Brooklyn Campus] and in Puerto Rican and Latino Studies at Brooklyn College. Inspired by Awilda’s artistry, and the ways in which she creates meaning from her experiences of feeling and seeing, I wanted to engage in further dialogue regarding her process of creating visually arresting and compelling performance works. This document includes excerpts from several interviews with Ms. Sterling-Duprey about her work and creative process. I thank Dr. Jeffrey Friedman, Ph.D., founder of the Legacy Oral History Program for his advice and assistance with this project.]

Julia Ritter: After many years of creating work, how would you describe your aesthetic choices, your inspirations – do you have a mission statement for yourself as an artist?

Awilda Sterling-Duprey: There are two major impulses in my work. The first has to do with the self as gendered – myself as a woman.
When I use that as a motive, the use of loneliness has a lot to do with being disappointed about love relationships. Since I am influenced by popular culture – I use boleros, and traditional boleros speak of disillusionment. As men are usually singing the songs, the men are singing of disillusionment with women and the women carry the weight of that, but I turn that around and use it in what I call a movement monologue. The movement monologue starts with a relationship with the song, and through that I respond to what the singer is saying. My second impulse is my concern with bringing folk traditions into a more contemporary focus. In my work with traditional orisha dances, and with African traditional dances I have found I am in love with the strength and tradition of that movement. The vocabulary is not the same as that of other movement forms. I want to use the forms to teach and show that there is validation in African culture and religions and to erase all the prejudices that others have written on those forms. There is a lot of color, texture, beauty, joy in the dances and most importantly, I have found that the transformation that people go through when they learn them is astounding. I am really using them, I suppose, by extending them and expanding them beyond the form and the vocabulary so people can feel comfortable coming close to the traditional cultures and religions.

**JR:** Can you tell me about your training?

**ASD:** This is something I have been thinking a lot about...asking myself, “When we talk about training, is it in terms of formal training or training in terms of how you begin to think about work?”

**JR:** How about your formal training...?

**ASD:** The first experience was with an African-Puerto Rican woman Sylvia del Villard, although it was not the training as I know now that you take a person and you do a warm-up, and a center, or...diagonals or sets of step patterns, and then experiment on those sequences. Although it was not that formal, she had a consistent pattern in her classes and rehearsals. She would talk about what she wanted to do and while practicing the steps we were warming up the body - that I understand now. At sixteen or seventeen, I did not have the idea at that time that I would continue this – I was doing it because I liked it. So I was very disciplined and very interested in what she had to offer. And what she was offering was a culture that dances and a culture that was very close to Puerto Rican culture, without anybody telling us...
before her, and connecting it with the African Diaspora. And for me the main thing was a connection, how I could relate to and how I could learn the dances, which were complicated, so easily, with such openness. I always think it was because of rhythm, because of my training with rhythm in Puerto Rican popular culture that opened the path to connect with something that was apparently strange to us, but really a part of the culture.

My second training was a big leap away from West African dances connected to Puerto Rican bomba – from there I went to jazz dance. Jazz dance as very much a part of personal technique of the teacher, Lotte Cordero. Lotte trained in ballet under her mother, and she [Lotte] wanted to create in Puerto Rico a vehicle to create musicals, because that is how she wanted to express herself. She was not only a very creative person, but at the same time a woman who was connected with the social and political situation in Puerto Rico, so she would use her work to speak about how she felt about her relationship to the country. This was very interesting for me, how she could mix those two different lines into one concept of performance. I was very attracted to that technique also because it was very rhythmic; she was Puerto Rican and wanted to bring that rhythm across. Her two teachers – the first time I went to New York City in the 1970s, I took some classes with them – were Jo Jo Smith, who was receiving a lot of recognition at the time because of the way he was connecting African dance steps with his jazz technique, and there was also Luigi, [someone] coming from a European tradition and an Italian-American at the same time – his line, was completely different from Jo Jo’s and was more stylized, the work of the upper body and the shoulders, and he designed a whole technique of the upper body. I was very attracted to that, where the upper body and the line was stressed. At this time I also became interested in the formality of the dance class, because this was a formal class, with barres, and mirrors.

JR: [Subsequently, Awilda returned to clarify more about her first movement influences...]

ASD: My first exposure was not to Puerto Rican bomba, but to social dancing, with partners, actually with my father. With my dad I learned to dance with a partner and this taught me to have a sense of being led. It taught me to have a relationship with another person, where bomba was very individual. In the 1950s, dance was very much

influenced by Cuban *danzón*, with the aesthetics of European partner
dances. It was very defined in terms of gender roles. So, I think that I
did not find it very difficult to follow and learn steps in a dance class
situation, although a different kind of structure, because of this
experience.

**JR:** I am very interested in the "sense of self" you started to experience
during your formal classes... which came from the interaction with the
mirrors that you mentioned...

**ASD:** I was very much annoyed and confused by the mirrors. This
was the first time I was looking at myself, my body in the mirror in a
different manner, not like an everyday person, pampering yourself,
but looking at movement. What I used to do, was close my eyes, and
the teacher would say open your eyes, but I would say – I feel I know
where I am going. But I did become comfortable with the mirror and
I also felt very easy with that technique as well... I found it very
beautiful and it was my first real connection with images I had seen
as a child of seeing Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing. Because
that was what gave me a different sensation of the dance that I knew
– they impacted me a lot, how they could glide through space with
such ease at the same time with such intricate steps of the feet. My
first class in jazz was... not seeing the person, but trying to see my
body moving. I was confronting another self – there I saw my
confusion, there I saw my uneasiness – I could see things I had not
seen when normally standing in front of a mirror, which was usually
when I checked to see how nice I looked, like when I was preparing to
go out. It was a different perspective from that self. At the same
time, I was feeling the movement and then seeing it happen, which
were two different things. I usually felt better than I saw. It took me a
long time to put both of those levels together... enjoying the form and
the shapes my body was making.

**JR:** What is so interesting about what you said is the connection with
those images of what we are taught a dancer looks like or is – whether
through the idea that the dancer is Ginger Rogers or Fred Astaire or
whoever – but there is that moment of “oh, my body does this too...”

**ASD:** Yes, yes, exactly. Once I felt good with what I was doing, I didn’t
worry. I wasn’t thinking that much– that was a pattern in my life, I
never think that what I do and enjoy I am going to continue - I just
continue. I don’t plan – I never planned to be a dancer, I told you, I was
training to be a painter. But this was so nice for me. I thought, I can do this, and people were calling me to do things. I never considered it a profession at that time.

In 1977, my first year at university in New York [Pratt University], I took a dance appreciation class with Pauline Tisch. She told me that next semester, there would be a workshop with a very important experimental dancer, Trisha Brown. What I appreciated about working with Trisha, was that she did not present herself as a “dance teacher.” She was so flowing and soft-spoken. At the same time she was working with us, she was experimenting with gesture, and sharing with us her work with accumulation. I was very attracted to that and realized that was part of what she would be teaching us to do, working with small movements and connecting ourselves with what our bodies could do. I remember that there was also a lot of floor work.

**JR:** Was this the first time you had experimented with working low to the floor?

**ASD:** Outside of exercises? Yes. The first time of using the floor as the means to produce, using the floor as an ally to produce movement and to learn about your body, just lying there. It was so relaxing and so permissive, that I fell in love with it immediately. What she [Brown] said to me is I can start from what I already have. Some of her company members would come and we would work on how to follow one part of the body, to use the floor in different manners. And to work in silence, to work without any other sound reference except your own, and to learn how to listen to your body and your breath.

This was very important to me. From the time when I was very small, I had always liked silence. To understand that you could produce dances in silence was a big release, and very emotional. Soon thereafter, Merián Soto recommended that I work with Dana Reitz. Dana was postmodern, but more the “teacher-type.” There was structure here. Dana worked on repetition patterns, and was also using the floor a lot and allowing yourself to work with what came to you. The process there was even more internal still, because – it was very cathartic for me – you had to really rely on moments of silence and use the ideas that came to your mind to produce movement and with this I started connecting myself with places, hidden spaces that I was not really aware of. If I told you I got emotional with Trisha’s work, with Dana it was real crying spells. This work was so personal, so deep and internal.
that it touched places that we don’t focus on so much. I worked with her for a span of five months in New York.

**JR:** And what was next for you?

**ASD:** While at Pratt, in the late 1970s – I began to work with Merián Soto. Merián was beginning her own projects. She would take us as her dancers and we would experiment. We would gather together, being friends, and we would do performances, sometimes at her studio, at that time on West Broadway and Canal Street. She was always very appreciative of our movements and how we brought back to her the ideas that she was experimenting with. At that time she was experimenting with Cuban “Son Montuno” – she was decoding the traditional time and frame of the musical structure. She was breaking that syncopation into something more personal and adding gestures, freezing movements while others continued dancing. “Son Montuno” was the basis of what would become mambo and salsa – so you would dance with a partner to a steady beat, and people would improvise but you would always have a structure that would pull you back together again. Merián was experimenting with that – making solos, duets, trios – she was using the classical structure of European or American dance in “Son Montuno.” That gave me ideas of how to improvise with rhythms I had already managed and how I could break them and listen to silence between the phrases and between melodies. I was mostly drawn to work with silence – once I learned that I could work with silence. Probably because I was dealing with sound so much of the time, I was very much interested in what my own self had to hear when listening. When working with silence I was always very aware because I didn’t have other references. How was I going to put these phrases into dance material – I had to be more aware than if I was connecting with other input.

**JR:** Tell me more about silence in your work...

**ASD:** I remember the first piece that I created, in 1978, it was called “Aquí y ahora” [Here and Now], because it was very short...I was mixing the elements that I learned from Trisha, Dana, and Merián. It was in silence and also using breath. I was looking at something in the back space, and I came to stage left, and then went across in a straight line from left to the right and when I would get to the right, I would pick a piece of dust, and begin doing the movement from that place, moving from the shoulder, just concentrating on moving from that place. My

very first piece of experimental dance, it was very moving, and when finished I had to cry. What happened was that the more I worked with silence, the more spaces I found in my body when doing movement, the more memories came to me from my childhood. So many people I knew could say many things about their childhood — but for me it was these techniques, working with my body, which started to bring up many memories... I found that work as a way of getting to flashbacks from my life...it was my way of remembering, working with my body.

**JR:** Alternative performance spaces have interested and influenced you, correct?

**ASD:** "Aquí y ahora" was done at 104th Street between Lexington and 3rd Avenue where there is an old firehouse. That firehouse was used by different organizations as an artist space, by Taller Boricua, a group of visual artists who had their studio there. There was a nice area that was like a living room, with the fire poles for sliding down. And we fell in love with that space — it didn’t have water, or heat or anything but we almost took it over by assault. It was one of the places that I loved the most...it was so old, but homey. At that time we felt we could do anything — I don’t know why I lost that sensation with time, because we were only really doing what felt good. Not having any worries for staging things, just doing what felt good and what was honest and...each of us very different from each other. Everyone had their own voice. That was why I felt so compelled to use different spaces to work in, because I had some ideas in mind. I still do that, I always wanted to see the physical space first and see what areas I wanted to use before I started to do any kind of work. And most of the time I would pick that structure from Dana Reitz, the improvisation structure. I would set myself points in the space and I would know what I would do in every point, but I would never know what I was going to do to get there. Those were my points of reference and I felt very comfortable with that, because it was also new for me. I had to be so aware of what I was going to do, that I didn’t have anytime to think that I was performing for an audience. I was just there and it was very much like child’s play. That was the training from Dana, just know where you are going, and what you are going to do once you are there and what happens in between — it will happen — and then the only thing you have to keep in mind is how you are going to get different shades, so you do not become so repetitive that you lose your own sense of things. That was enough for me.
At that time, I was entering my second year at the university, but Pratt closed their dance department that year, in 1978. That year I finished my work with Merián. In the early 1980s, I began to feel uncomfortable in New York. My son was very young, and he wanted to go back to Puerto Rico, so I returned. Once in Puerto Rico, I felt comfortable enough to start experimenting with my ideas. And what I found in my classes, was that once people began entering deeper in their bodies, they became uncomfortable with the work. I was doing a lot of work with the floor, with breathing, and I was adding some yoga and also closing the eyes and letting the images cross the mind without judging them and I think it was hard for some people. At the same time, I was beginning to show small pieces. My friend, Rafael Fuentes, had a really huge house in Santurce, with a living room that was perfect for performances. We had that as a performance space. Rafael had studied pantomime in San Francisco. There were many of us who were very enthusiastic, and our real goal was to build a school of contemporary arts in Puerto Rico. But the only thing we could do was be consistent in presenting our work. The school would never materialize, but we continued giving performances. Merián would also come to give workshops, and incorporate us into performances, when she would visit on vacations. We received a good reaction from people, which of course were all of our friends. I feel this pushed all of us to start working on other projects. We were so convinced that we wanted to do our work. We were not even saying we were doing something new...we were just representing another way that we had found to work. This way everyone had something to do and say and bring to the work...it was a really collective work.

It was about 1981 then. This was the beginning of the group “Pisotón,” when we were working at Casa Aboy, the house of cultural activist Ramón Aboy, located in the area of Miramar. This was his family’s house, and no one was using it. So he organized the cultural center, and different art expressions were presented in that small, experimental context. It was really like a cultural “clubhouse.” We worked there for eight to ten years consistently. It was a house known also for housing people who were very political. Many people came in and out, but we kept a nucleus of about five people and the others were invited, invited by Petra Bravo. She is a Cuban who has lived in Puerto Rico for many years. She was trained in classical ballet in Cuba, part of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba. She had been experimenting with classical ballet and modern dance in Miami, developing her own style with her

company “Fusión.” She was invited to work with us, first of all because we were looking for people who had experience in different arts, so that we could share that. She would venture more in doing group choreographies. Three or four of us were the core of people: Petra, playwright and actress/director Maritza Pérez Otero, actor/singer/dancer Jorge Arce, choreographer/dancer Gloria Llompart and myself.

**JR:** Tell me more about your work there, and your interest in locating performance in different places – when you started working at Casa Aboy, is there one piece that was your first work, or your signature work for that space?

**ASD:** I was always the one to use more non-traditional spaces. I was always looking for places to hide, and I could surprise the audience. I was always looking to do things unexpectedly, to leave them looking for where I was going – to leave them looking for where I was going when they thought I was coming back – and I would never come back! I was starting to feel that I could play with the audience, rather than giving them everything. I wanted them just to follow me – and at that time I found myself in power because I knew I had the power to get their attention. So I started to play with them, and moving them from place to place, leaving some people standing and some people sitting. And the structure of the house provided for that, it had a porch here, a set of stairs there, a second floor where you could begin speaking and then come down and small spaces like under the stairs, where you could begin a performance. I was in love with a friend, a guy who was very connected with nature and so was I. So one night I was looking outside and it was a full moon, so I called him and said, “Manolo, I called you so you can see the moon...” – *Manolo: Anoché te llamé para que vieras la luna.* And I found that so beautiful that I used that as the title. It was a very intimate piece, where I was dealing with an empty frame. I had found a frame, I think it was like six feet by six feet, on the street and when I saw this frame, I saw myself going in and out. And I said I don’t know what I am going to do with it, but I am taking this frame and I am going to start going in and out to see what happens. So I took it right to Casa Aboy, because that was the only place I could have it! It didn’t fit in my house, so I put it there and I started working the piece right there. And since I was working with an awkward sense of balance, instead of placing the frame on the floor, or on a horizontal line, I hung it from the tip, which made a huge diamond, it made it bigger. And it was supposed to barely touch the floor so that if I touched

it, it would turn. I worked more on the prop than on the actual piece, because I wanted to see myself reacting to the movement also of the frame. And I was accompanying that, I was humming the opening segment of a Brazilian Bachianas...the same voice is like an undulating line so I used that as my motivation to start the dance.

**JR:** And you were humming - as a score?

**ASD:** Yes, I was humming at the same time and I was sitting in a chair inside the frame, with my back to the audience. And so I would start like drawing a line like that, and go around the table and stop again, and while this was happening the chair sat there, and I did the movements in and out in silence and I finished by putting a vase, or something on the chair. If it was ten minutes, it was a long piece! But it was very well received. And I had very subtle lighting also, I only had a lamp that was hitting the floor, so I was almost in darkness. That was the first piece I presented in Casa Aboy as a solo artist. The rest of the program was all the people doing their thing, and mostly group...collaborations and group pieces.

**JR:** What year was this solo presented?

**ASD:** It was 1982. Because it was the first presentation that we did at Casa Aboy and it was PACKED. It was really, really packed. The balcony was packed and people were looking kind of in the windows and some people went to the stairs so they could see. It was really, amazing, it was packed. We did it for two or three weekends, for a start that was a hit. It was very interesting, because we had all kinds of criticism, which varied from the best things to the worst. But most of the people, when we got the bad criticism started to be very worried. And I said to them, “Why are you worried? It is understandable they don’t understand what we are doing, it is only us that do. It is new! I think what is important is that we don’t get that personal. Don’t worry about the audience. Look at the people that were here, they liked it. That is what we need. So the critics don’t understand it – what are we going to do?” I was never worried about a bad review if I felt good about what I was doing. If I didn’t like it, I was the first one to be very critical. But if I felt good about what we were doing, I never felt threatened by critics.

**JR:** I think that is very important – if you are satisfied, you should let those things fall away.

**ASD:** Oh, yes, yes.
**JR:** How did you feel empowered by these improvisational forms?

**ASD:** Because some people were not used to improvisation – they had to have everything set, they were very much afraid, they would think that improvisation was like being lazy or doing things with no responsibility, but I would come back to myself. For them to be at ease, I would always present a structure, and say “But remember, it can change...”. Probably I would decide to change something, and this gave me the opportunity to have confidence in myself, and to start expressing with clarity what I wanted to do. This was also when I really began making solos for myself. I felt threatened working with groups, I felt I didn’t have enough vocabulary and I didn’t have the craft – I have never taken composition – and I decided to do solos. I was very at ease working with solo pieces.

And when working with solo pieces, I was working with gestures most of the time, and because at this time I was thirty years old, I never developed such technique as high extensions. I was more interested in working with the upper body and I started connecting with my painting. That was a real breakthrough. I started feeling that my body was doing movement – the painting I was doing was abstract expressionism and I was standing in front of my surface and just moving my arm. But I did not know I was moving my arm – I was looking at what the movement of the arm was doing on the surface in terms of mixing colors. But all of the sudden, I connected that what I was doing with movement had a lot to do with what I was doing in painting. In time, I wanted to move that painting as three-dimensional space, and that forced me to want to move in very large spaces. But I couldn’t do that at the time, because I wanted to work, to paint straight on the wall – something that no one would allow me to do – in a gallery? Forget it! When in Puerto Rico they didn’t let me work my painting as big as I wanted, and paint straight on the walls, I decided I was going to dance with the elements of painting. Then that gave me a more solid structure. Even when improvising, I understood that what I was looking for was self-expression – in painting I never did a sketch, I always attacked the surface with color. Now, I could dance as I was painting and I could use as much space as I wanted with my gestures because my body became the instrument. When I started choreographing as a painter, with the painting experience in my mind, and not the body of a dancer, I really started to use more space and really compose – I was thinking of different types of line, different types of texture, about depth and about tones.
JR: [Later, Awilda clarified a few more influences on her work, particularly related to design...]

ASD: Sometimes I don’t have specific images for a set – but I often have images of color. I work the set in terms of changes in color. I often need three-dimensional objects in the space. I need spaces that you move around, to enter the spaces they create. And they determine what path and what interaction I am going to have with them. Sometimes they have a specific role of breaking the space into different areas, or something specific, say, to the work. But then also, I can work in a very empty space where the mood is changed with changes of color.

JR: In the early 1990s, you were working with a folk dance company. Were you starting to work with groups? What was the company’s name?

ASD: That is a long, long name. I mention it because I am not very good with names! Ballet Folklórico Contemporáneo de Caguas. And when I say “group,” it was eighteen people. Nine couples. Because those companies, they are very gender oriented and the participants were paid by the city....part of the government, and funded. I started choreographing on the side, things more consonant with my view with the two or three who were willing to work with me at that time. And because they already knew their choreographies, and then I would work with them - and I had a very good assistant – working their choreographies with a different touch. And the good thing was that we always...most of the time, worked with live music, and that allowed me to do those changes. I could use the live music to add things... I could play more. So I felt more comfortable working with them. The last work I did with them - I did not know it would be my last - but then I had to resign because at that time I was starting to travel a lot and they were not giving me enough time to travel. And I said, “If I don’t travel, my work won’t grow. So if you cannot allow me to travel, I have to resign.” They didn’t want me to go, but I said, “I’m leaving and what we can do is if you want me here, you can give me a contract and I can come from time to time, but I cannot stay, because I need time for myself.” So I ended up choreographing a more theatrical concept dealing with what I had learned from the beginning, from Sylvia del Villard, and the African dances and making from that a vignette of different moments in the history of Puerto Rican song and dance; much of the inspiration for this came from the African community in Puerto Rico. It was a very successful presentation because it was not like
what they were used to doing. Usually, every time that they would finish a dance they would take a bow. The audience felt very awkward because they had to decide to clap or not. So we went in transitions, very clean transitions from one thing to the other until the end and there was this silence, because they were not sure if it was over...and then the audience responded very, very positively. And then, I also had the opportunity to work solos with the performers – they were so at my mercy, in that piece. I could work group pieces, but I also could do duets and trios. It was very nice.

JR: And what was the name of that piece?

ASD: It was “Poemario Baila’o y Bombea’o pa’ Sylvia y Palés.” Luis Palés-Matos, is the poet that she [Sylvia del Villar] praised the most. Palés, a Puerto Rican poet, and very prominent in the 1930s... was the first Puerto Rican poet to do a whole work on the African presence in Puerto Rico. And his poetry is very rhythmic, so she used his poetry to make dances to, and to stand out that specific way that rhythm is a part of African languages. She was very fond of him and because he was so into bringing that African presence...most of the poetry she worked with was from Palés-Matos. So I was doing something like an homage to her, to his work. I took her original script, that was mostly all the poems and the dances and something from a story, and I condensed it. And I used different rhythms that identified each poem with a specific Caribbean island. So it was a nice variation of rhythms and also a good variation in terms of the movements. And it was significant because I had to do workshops with them first, I had to do release technique, I had to do some yoga, I had to do this in many sessions so they could really get into it, but it was very pretty. Very pretty! But since then I have not choreographed a group piece, again. But I think now one is coming to me.

JR: Name some other works you have done, and the spaces you worked in...what was influencing you when you returned to Puerto Rico?

ASD: I did “Aquí y ahora,” an extended version, in 1982 and that was at the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture in San Juan. That was the first time I choreographed for a stage. After that, Viveca Vázquez came to Puerto Rico to present a piece that was called Asignación de baile [Dance Assignment]. She wanted me to participate and she called and gave me the instructions. I also was designing the flyer, the publicity. So I started working with Viveca in that manner. I could see at that

time she had developed a language for herself, that she had grasped enough language as a tool to choreograph a group piece. I said to myself, “am I going to do that? I don’t think so…” and I kept running away from creating group works. So every time that she invited me to work on her pieces, I separated myself as a dancer until I understood what she wanted me to do as an element of her work. How she would choreograph also helped me understand many of the elements I didn’t know how to manage in a group. Now, just now, I am venturing into groups – just three, and that is too much, with myself always on the outside. But working for example, with Petra Bravo and Viveca, I have learned much; I have learned to accept that even if you know how to choreograph, that it’s not every day that you come with suitable material to work with. That you do not have to really push yourself – because we work in such a tight environment in terms of warmth and connection – we learn to respect each other. When I was called to direct a whole dance company, the Ballet Folklórico Contemporáneo de Caguas, because they needed an African-Caribbean component in the company, I found that I had to live with the whole repertory that they had, because they had many dances from different places in Puerto Rico. Because I brought a different approach to choreographing, I had to rethink everything. I started by respecting and acknowledging what they had done. Some of the choreographies were, in my opinion, awful, but I never told them because they considered them good and they had been performing for many years. So I started by telling them that my approach to choreographing is not what you are doing all the time. First of all, the kinds of dances you are used to doing are not the dances I am doing for myself, but I do know about these dances enough to remake them with what I know. Because if I am going to direct now, I have to put the seal of my personality there and if you agree, we can work and if you don’t agree, I won’t be able to work. So I started, before teaching them anything I was called to teach them, I started playing with their pieces, by changing partners, changing or delaying entrances. At first it was very awkward, and I think they even hated me. But when they started to feel that they could have a good time remaking what they were doing, then I started teaching new material. This was in 1990.

JR: And then you created “Vejigante Decrépito?” Several dance writers and critics have mentioned this work of yours – can you elaborate on your process and its influences?
ASD: “Vejigante” was created in 1999. When I was painting as a way of expressing myself – the choices I make...they are not intellectually planned. They are more the energy of how I see and what I see at the moment. How do I want to break into that – how do I break into the elements that are present in the tradition to extend it into something more contemporary? I want to break the concept of folklore as static. I am uncomfortable with folklore as static. What I can feel is that there are principles that evolve around people, and they change with time, but I am trying to break that space or formation that folklore brings to culture and bring it to a more accessible space. For “Vejigante,” I had a wire sculpture of a vejigante and it was beginning to corrode – because of the weather in San Juan and it was very corroded and breaking down. A metaphor for African culture in Puerto Rico is “disappearance” – it is crumbling down. This is a short piece about the crumbling of the essence of the culture – this vejigante is very much away and apart from its original meaning. I wanted to keep challenging attitudes of the vejigante...they can venture to do whatever they want. I was using those elements of the vejigante, but using the female body, breaking gender patterns, bringing all those elements together with my contemporary voice.

JR: Will you discuss your decision to use blackface in this performance?

ASD: Originally, I had a half mask, but had to come up with another option. An African person with the black face was something that was very much used in the African context. I was not using it as an ethnic commentary. I was using it more in aesthetic terms, to represent the absence of expression, a mask over my face, “you are not you,” but you are the mask – the absence of something – in the theory of color, black can be the mixture of all colors or the absence of light. In the end, all the elements really worked to speak about ethnicity and that was what the work conveys and provokes in people.

JR: And you did a work in 2002 based on migration? Can you describe your installation of the piece, and more about your creation? I think you mentioned that it was inspired by a woman who arrives in New York, displaced and terrified?

ASD: The name of the piece on migration was “Esto fue lo que trajo el barco” [This is What the Boat Brought In]. The story behind this piece starts the year before, the first night I did a piece at BADD [Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance]. It was a shared concert with the group

Universas. I was working with my son and my brother. Well, both of them are percussionists, but my brother is a master drummer. So I was using him to help me structure...a piece structured by rhythms from different surfaces. One time I heard him hitting on the table, and I said, "I want that for my piece."

So they were doing this and at the same time, they were playing rhythm with their voice. And when the Universas group saw, when we had our rehearsal and they saw what I was doing, they said, "Hey, we are doing more or less the same thing," because I did a very simple, a very practical installation, they said, "Can we use your elements?" And I said "okay, why not." And it proved to be a very successful night. So I told her, [Jane Gabriel, Associate Director of Pepatían], "Jane, what about working a full work with them, in collaboration?" and then Jane said, "Yes, I think it is fabulous," but it didn’t work. For so many reasons it didn’t work as well, because they [Universas] are better known in the Bronx than I am, the person who went to video took more of what they were doing because while they were performing, I was doing my movement between them.

I was trying to work there that sensation of luggage and...usually, and this is very comical, even today there are so many types of luggage, from the most expensive to the cheapest, that I don’t know why Puerto Ricans like to put our things in boxes. When I fly, and that is why it is most important with Puerto Ricans, what you see at the airport are boxes and boxes and boxes. Because they buy things to give to people, to the families, and they carry it in boxes. And I do like boxes a lot, even in my visual work, in my visual arts work, I work with boxes. I wanted to deal with boxes as the main element representing migration, in different sizes and different shapes. I was not going to be here during the time the installation was ready, I was going to be here one day after the installation was going to be done and one day before the show. So I called these two friends, Benji Rosen and Gadiel Rivera, because I had worked with them before, to see how they could interpret that migration process with the elements we were working with. And it had to be using found objects, I didn’t want to buy anything, it had to be everything that they found, that they could find. So, I didn’t have any idea, they didn’t send me anything, they didn’t call me, but I was confident. The day that I came, the whole room was set, and it was very beautiful in a sense, but very strong, because they had put all the boxes hanging at different levels from the ceiling and in the small space

that was in the basement of the Bronx museum. There is a huge room there, I don’t know whether they use it but it is a beautiful square room, big room, with a stage. So right on stage they rebuilt, New York buildings, with stacking boxes, of different sizes, like a New York skyline. So what I did, was enter to the space, like a person...my whole movement centered on looking at the high-rise buildings and being very confused and carrying many boxes. So I don’t know what to do with the boxes, and I go to this building where I am supposed to be living. And the whole time while I am doing my movement, they are singing from different spots. There are five of them, so there are five spotlights; each of them has a microphone...Universals. The person who was videotaping, concentrates on them, so most of my movement was lost. We didn’t have a dress rehearsal, at the time that we started my rehearsal...the person did what she could, and the video is not good. So to me, that is lost. This was supported by Pepatían, in the “Jump It Up Series,” in 2002.

JR: What about the photo you showed me – can you speak about that work – the title, set, costumes?

ASD: “Shining Star of the Caribbean” in a sense...is the way of speaking about going back, so you can push further. The set was...boxes of different shapes...a small mountain that I am behind. The music was a jazz score, “The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady,” it’s divided into movements, each one represented some kind of human condition. The music is by Charles Mingus. All the sounds were very distorted...no single instrument could be identified. The character could not find balance – she was wearing a very high heel, only one. The first part is very abstract – a character, first time to use a character, costumes/wig – transforming myself. Another kind of mask, into the image of a prostitute – which represented Puerto Rico – available to whoever wanted to use her. Here I show myself losing my mind, by constantly changing my identity, and the movements – around many boxes – looking for things in the boxes, taking off and putting on many items. The last piece of garments and costumes I use refers to female African dress. The character finds more stability, more strength in her stance and balance and I am using elements of a warrior, Ogún. I was creating a metaphor for Puerto Rico in a stage of abandonment...going back to the traditions that made Puerto Rican identity – not as a solution but as an alternative – going back to those ideas and traditions for information, really creating characters. The only things I carry are the
costumes—I bring the piece to life using items found in the space in which I am performing. This was during a time when a lot of people were living on the streets in boxes, many homeless.

**JR:** *Is this the last work that you did with “Jump It Up,” or have you done something else since then?*

**ASD:** Yes, it is. You see, “Jump It Up” is usually in the spring. I have done other things with Jane, in BADD, but in concepts that were sponsored by other programs...such as the Latino Performance Series. There, I presented a work that I worked on separately, which is experimenting with traditional Yoruba dance, Yoruba religious dance and more experimental qualities. That piece is called “Circles of the Wind.”

**JR:** *Is this something you want to expand?*

**ASD:** Yes, that is the one I want to expand into a group piece.

**JR:** *But you did it first as a solo?*

**ASD:** Yes, first as a solo. Yes, because you know, I have to feel it first. And then later I decide how I want to distribute it to other people.
Resources


