

Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance and Cultural Center

WHERE CREATIVITY CELEBRATES TRADITION

BY AUTUMN RHEA CARPENTER

1In America, as in other countries, certain dance moves can trigger a memory and reveal a moment in history. For some, the hand jive prompts recollections of "Grease," in which John Travolta and Olivia Newton John playfully dance around a movie-set carnival. The 1980s were notorious for jerky dance moves like the Roger Rabbit, Cabbage Patch, and of course, the dance made only for the extremely flexible: break dancing. The Macarena haunted our conscious-

ness for longer than is pop-culturally necessary, and swing dancing even made its second spin around the dance floor with clubs bopping to the old-style beats. No matter the jig, dancing has a way of influencing people's attitudes and coloring life experiences.

In Puerto Rico, dance continues to play a vital role in shaping the cultural atmosphere. The Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance and Cultural Center (PRFDance) in Austin, a non-profit, strives to teach

visitors about Puerto Rican dance, as well as the territory's performing arts, cultural studies, literature, food, history, arts, crafts and poetry.

A FAMILY TRADITION

Dr. Ana Marie Maynard, director of PRFDance, described the organization's genesis: "My family was from Caguas, Puerto Rico, and I grew up in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in the Bronx, New York," she said. "One day I looked at my 6-month-old son and realized that I did not want him to grow up without experiencing Puerto Rican culture. My grandfather played the guitar in his own band, and my aunt was a singer in a trio with her own radio show. Music shaped my childhood."

Maynard participated in ballet and traditional dance classes, but she gained much of her dance knowledge from family events. "When I began to formally study Puerto Rican traditions, I realized that my parents taught me so much about our family history through dance,"

she said. "I always thought that my dad was adding funky steps to the salsa just to embarrass me, and he was actually dancing traditional dance moves, just as they had always been performed."

A MULTICULTURAL MIX

In 1997, Maynard founded a small dance company, PRFDance. "This all began as a dream and, in 2001, evolved into the first Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Austin, which currently serves 60 to 70 Hispanics, Africans, Venezuelans, Columbians, and other children and adults of various descents. We provide 10 performing arts and cultural programs per week, and a company of 20 professional dancers and musicians. PRFDance serves Austin and the surrounding areas, which contain 81 percent of the Puerto Rican population living in Texas."

Just last month, The Institute of Puerto Rican Culture named the Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance and Cultural Center

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"Even in the face of adversity, there is always room for music and dance. Those two things lift your joy and help people to forget their problems."



The Seis Dance, one of the the four musical/dance traditions of Puerto Rico

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its 5th Affiliated Cultural Center in the mainland United States, bringing Austin on par with Chicago and Florida, where the other active cultural centers are located.

This Austin-based non-profit teaches four distinctive Puerto Rican dances, including the *bomba*, *bailas de las montañas*, *plena*, and the *bailas de salón*. "Each of these dances represents a piece of Puerto Rican culture," said Maynard. "The *bomba* came from West Africa and the descendants who worked the colonial sugar cane fields. The mountain people who worked the coffee plantations performed the *bailas de las montañas*, and *plena* was born in the working class barrios of Ponce, Puerto Rico. The *bailas de salón* was the 19th century ballroom dance."

Folkloric dance is often shared as an

oral history and when it is not passed down, these dances will disappear. In order to be a good folkloric dancer, you not only need to know how to move your feet, you should also be educated about the dance's roots," said Maynard. "There is an aspect of acting involved with dancing, and an actor should always understand the part he or she is playing."

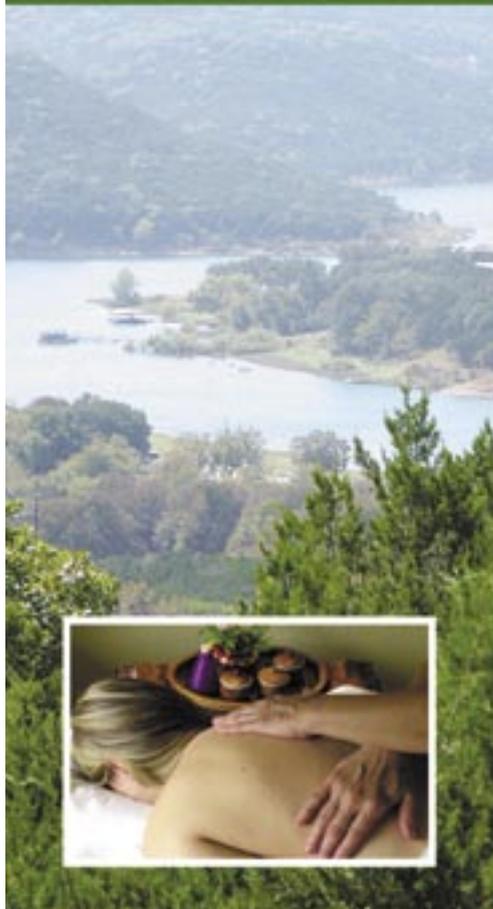
PRFDance is staffed entirely by volunteers, representing a variety of backgrounds. "We welcome people who are talented and are trainable," said Maynard. "It is difficult to find skilled Puerto Rican dancers wandering the streets of Austin. When a person dances, a deep, sparkling joy should bubble to the surface. We are seeking people who possess that sparkle."

Maynard emphasized that Puerto Ri-

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"Our teachers reflect that diverse population, and the children are able to see themselves in their teachers. It makes for a good combination."

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cans make music an important aspect of everyday life. "Even in the face of adversity, there is always room for music and dance," she said. "Those two things lift

your joy and help people to forget their problems. If the world thought of embracing that model there would be less war in the world."

PRFDance teachers are a mixture of

**PUERTO RICAN FOLKLORIC DANCE'S
Sembrando Herencia 2005 – "Puerto Rico, Mi Patria"
December 11, 2005 at 3 p.m.**

PUERTO RICAN FOLKLORIC DANCE brings the rich heritage of Puerto Rico to Austin in a lively performance of traditional dance, music and song that passes on this heritage to a new generation, showcasing more than 50 of the center's own dancers, musicians, and performing arts students.

The mini-musical, "Puerto Rico Mi Patria," will feature an exciting "obra" of traditional music and dance that tells the story of the British Invasion of 1797 when a fleet of over 7,000 men arrived for what should have been an easy victory with less than 200 trained Spanish soldiers guarding the fort. To their surprise, the British discovered the heroism of the Puerto Rican people as farmers, fishermen and ordinary citizens came from the mountains, coastal towns and cities to save the island. This theatrical creation was made in collaboration with Rupert Reyes, director of Teatro Vivo. Special guests include Jaleo Flamenco, Austin's own student flamenco company, and performing arts students from Texas Empowerment Academy.

This lively celebration of Spanish, Taino and West African roots will take place Sunday, December 11th, 3 p.m. at Journey Theatre, in the Fine Arts Center at W. Charles Akins High School, 10701 S. First St., south of Slaughter Lane in Austin.

Admission:

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