

## **VictorAlexander\_20180111\_Master\_ESchwall\_small.mp4**

**Victor Alexander** [00:00:02] My name is Victor Alexander and this is the Chicago Dance History Project.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:00:09] Thank you so much Victor for meeting with us. We're really excited to be speaking with you. And just to get us started off, so as I kind of explained in e-mail exchanges this is just going to be you telling us about your life.

**Victor Alexander** [00:00:24] Okay.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:00:24] So pretty easy. You're the expert on that.

**Victor Alexander** [00:00:28] Oh Lord.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:00:29] [laughs]

**Victor Alexander** [00:00:30] About my life.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:00:31] So just to start us off I wanted you to tell us a little bit about your early life. When and where you were born, and some memories you have about your childhood.

**Victor Alexander** [00:00:45] Okay. So I say my name and all that?

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:00:47] Sure, yeah, that'd be great.

**Victor Alexander** [00:00:49] So my name is Victor Alexander. I'm originally from Cuba. More exactly Guane, Pinar del Rio, right?

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:00:58] Mhm.

**Victor Alexander** [00:00:58] So now I've been in Chicago for the last almost 16 years and now I'm the director of Ruth Page School of Dance. Let's go back to my childhood. See if, what can I remember from there. Well I was born in a little town in Pinar del Rio called Guane. It's six hours away from Havana. I never was interested in dance, just saying like that. I think it's valid to be honest and say no I wasn't interested in that. I liked to dance. Yes. But pursuing dance school, never, I was more interested in the sport and hanging out with friends. Uh, I loved to escape on weekends and then go and ride horse with my cousins in the countryside. And one day when I was in sixth grade the, in the school where I was doing like sixth grade, the, there was a group of teachers from uh National School of Dance in Havana. And they came and they select and they asked people that never have been, never taken dance class, if they want to audition for the National School of Dance in Havana. So I said yes just for the fun of missing the school and not going to school on Fridays. So I would have a long weekend, right? So my mom don't want me to go in the beginning because at that time in Cuba being a dancer was being gay. It was a big, uh, strong concern in families about that. So my mom kind of. We argue a little bit about it. Uh, my stepfather, my grandfather who passed away told me to, told my mom just to let him go. You know just for the fun of it. What can happen? So I did went. There were a thousand kids in that audition for the entire state. Uh. I got kicked out the first round. I went to the bus. I really didn't care about it. And 30 minutes later I got pulled back again. And then they redo the audition for me. And I was the only one that had to stay for the whole,

uh, boys. It was two of the girls. And then I had to stay. I went home, told my mom. She said like, "No that's not right." And I said, "Well. This is the letter." My mom went a couple months later, she have to go and visit the school. They explain everything. And in, I think the end of June, July, they sent a letter saying that I was accepted into school. So I had to move to Havana when I was 11.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:04:05] Before you go on I wanted to know. Do you remember the year that this was happening? That you auditioned?

**Victor Alexander** [00:04:12] Yeah.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:04:13] What year was that?

**Victor Alexander** [00:04:14] I auditioned for the National School in 1985.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:04:16] '85.

**Victor Alexander** [00:04:16] Ooph.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:04:20] And do you know why they came and got you from the bus stop and had you come back? How did that happen?

**Victor Alexander** [00:04:27] Yeah, there was a ballet teacher called Isabel Labarca. I think she live in Ecuador now. She was the one that went back and got me. And when she asked, when I asked, "Yeah, why?" And the instructor from my town that took the bunch of kids to go into the audition. She asked, "So why do you want him back?" Because there were other kids that they were dancing in the, let's call it a district, right in the part district. And she asked, "So why do you want him back? And not the others?" Like, "Well, ah, we saw him. He have a nice feet. And he's flexible, but he seemed like he was not paying attention to what he was doing. So we want to make sure that we don't make a mistake." So you know they, they just called me in and then we do everything again. Like do a couple tendus, and then they, I start to realize that I have something that I never knew. That, you know, they told me point your feet and point my feet. She took her shoes and then she said, "You see? Yours compared with mine?" And I, "Yeah like, it's kind of similar. Okay." You know. And then we went to this place. I find out that I have this plate, things that I never knew before. And then it went on. So yeah, I started when I was 11 in the school. I start my seventh grade all the way until 12th grade. Those seven years in the school, so many mixed feeling about it, but it was an amazing experience. So many mixed feelings for the fact that I had to leave my family behind. When I was 11. So I was living in Pinar del Rio, in Guane, which is six hours away. I cannot go in and out every day or every other weekend. I have a brother, a lit- a younger brother too. So my mom have to stay there. My mom was working too. So yeah it was. It was a great experience because you create a huge level of independency. Right. How to, how to figure it out everything your own. Yes. You talk once in a while. I mean I'll talk to my uncles. I will talk to my mom once in a while. But it's different. You have to wait for the time, so you don't have them everyday there. So you leave them with kids that you just met. And then we talking about from 11 years old all the way until 17, 18 we all live in the same dorm. So, I mean you. The nights can be I mean terribles or can be so night because no one there was an angel. You know, everybody there have little devil horns. So they will put fire on your sheet or [laughs] they will hang wet pillows on top of your bed and then you wake up in the middle of the night and you cannot sleep anymore. So stuff like that, I mean that happened right. But those are the moments where you are like, [whispers] "Oh, my god, wish I can be home now."

But in the dancing part, in the human. It teach you a lot. It teach you a lot. I learned how to love what I'm doing today. Which in the beginning it for me was just like an escape. I knew I have to move out of my town because in my head it was too small for me. Right? It was. I walked the town in ten minutes. I ride a bike and I go from one street to the other. And that's it, the town is over. So somehow, since I was little I have that ambition of I need to go somewhere else. And I think that was my, my escape. I knew it. I'm not sure right. But that was my my way to, my way out. And in the beginning like I was there because of the commitment and the physicality of being involved with a lot of people doing activities all day long. Being able [coughs], sorry. Being able to be in a big city, like Havana, you know it's like moving from a little town in Michigan or something that you have just three house around you and come to Chicago for the first time. It's wow. Or New York. Um, and then, uh, you know all that thing and. But then we start going every, every two, three months they will take us to see the national company. And I think that was one of the things that really engaged me when I started seeing the national company. And I thought, oh that's how it looks like. Cause I was doing sport all the time. I was doing volleyball, track and field, but I never saw how to become a dancer. You know, like that was not in my, in my brother. That is not what I really want to do and, but being in the school and being able to start socializing and start interacting with the advanced students. And then I will I would prefer escape from my academics and go to the dance school and hide and watch dance class from the advanced levels than be sitting in the classroom, you know. So and then there I start to kind of link myself with the whole thing. Oh, this can be interesting. And it took me time. It didn't happen right away I mean. The first year I finished with good grades in the dance part, but my academics were not the best because I was discovering something else. My second year I almost got kicked out of the school because I got this mixed feeling of being away. And I want to be with my family and I will escape on weekdays and then travel to, to my family to spend time with my family. And it was a hard time. It was a hard time. Uh. I think it was you know growing and all that period of 11, 12, 13 years old boy and trying to figure it out. Life, without that parenthood system you know. And, and I got, I mean I was this close to get kicked out of the school. Things got to the director of the school at that time, [name], and a few of the teachers, like [name], and they were. No no. They talked to my mom and they kind of get to consensus there and be like no, let's give him a chance. And then I got my chance and I don't know if I did it right or not, but I finished that year and then the third year I have the, the, we call the pase de nivel, which is they audition that you do. It's national. Now it's different. But in my time it was, we're talking way back. I mean we're talking about 198-, 1988? Nineteen eighty nine, something like that. Yeah. So it was different because then all of the dance school from ha- from the country would come to Havana. To audition and it will be 10 boys. And 10 girls. To start next year so. It was hard. It was tough but. I kind of focused a little bit and I wanted to stay. I decide that I want to stay. And then I start, then I, the whole, that whole passion for dance really started growing. I mean at that time because there was some other motivation, it was, was not to prove myself that I can do it. I knew I can do it. But there were so many doubts around me. Like my family was questioning all the time. The school and the teacher, the teachers and the school were questioning all the time. Will he be able to pull this off or not? So I think that challenge and the motivation of like I have to prove this to them that I can do it. Is, it made this, this whole passion that start to growing a lot more. So I did that pase de nivel. I, of course, I stay through and I did my four years for the other level, for the advanced levels in the school. And then I end up in Danza Contemporánea de Cuba.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:13:55] Before we move on to Danza, could you tell me just some important teachers that had at la ENA?

**Victor Alexander** [00:14:00] In la ENA? Yeah, there was, ah, I think all the teachers there were important. One way or the other, they, they mark you, you know, so. But the one that really stick with me all the time was [name]. Was my modern dance teacher. She really put everything, I will say she put everything on me. Like, she say he's going through. Yeah. I mean all the way until my last year. Isabel Labarca, one of the ballet teachers, [name], they worked really hard with me as well. Uh, I had L- Ulacia, which was, which was my teacher for one, two years. But he really pushed me really hard, too. But [name] was the one that really you know put like, she bet everything on me. And in that transition, I had Isidro Rolando, which is one of the founders and was principal dancer and is one of the dance history in Cuba, you know, for Danza Contemporánea de Cuba. He was my teacher and my last year, my graduation year. But I got to work with him as a choreographer. He choreograph for me some of the repertory piece that he has in the company for one of the festival, for young talent that we have, we used to have at that time, called from the UNIAC, the Union for Artists and Writers in Cuba. So there was a couple of years that they organized like a competition for young talent. So my first one, Isidro was the one that choreograph a solo for me, and then I did some of his repertory from the company. So Isidro, he put all his money on me since I was in my last year in the school all the way until I come to the U.S. in 2002.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:16:03] Wow. And I was gonna ask about the UNIAC experience, and in a lot of your bios you mention that you won first in this 1992 UNIAC competition. Can you tell me a little bit more about the piece? It was by Isidro? Or was it-

**Victor Alexander** [00:16:21] Yeah. It was yeah. First, first year. Yeah I'm gonna go back. My first I have, uh, Ulacia, [name], choreogaph a solo for me and I was pretty upset about it. I was pretty mad. I hate it because it was a female solo. Choreogaphed. I mean just, I just have to learn it. So there was a dancer that, she's in Miami now, she's a photograper, name is Ab- Gomez, I think? I would say so. We're really good friends, but then I have to do her solo. It was a challenge. They did it on purpose. Great, but it was a challenge and I was pretty upset about that because everybody else was doing a lot of other things and I was doing basically a female solo, which was all like legs and turn and the day of the competition I completely forgot. The solo was a minute longer. I mean I think two or three minutes in it, I went boop. Blank, and I start to improvise. So that was. I just remember being in the dressing room in the Teatro Mella and having Ulacia coming down to the dressing room and I saw her through the mirror. She's like, "What happened?" I said, "I don't know." She's like, "I know what happened, but it's okay." So you know and my last, in that year I got second place. That year I got second place. I did choreography from Lu- Ulacia. I did [name] from Isidro Rolando. It was one of the classic in the company. It was a priest based on the Greek history, on this myth. And so it was a duet and then a I choreograph- uh I, I perform another piece by Es- Perez, a dancer that is in Ecuador now, I think, too. And, oh there's so many memories now. And my last year, Isidro did choreograph for me. The solo for the competition. And I did again the [name] choreography, but Isidro, uh, he did a solo based on me. It's funny, the name of the solo was "My Name is Victor." But it was, uh, eight minute solo, and it was all about my personality and what I can really do. How he figure out things that I can do, I don't know, but how he imagine that, there were things that he imagine that I can do. And it just happened once or two times and no more. [laughs] But he pulled a monster out of me. He did. I mean, yeah. He was, I have to say during my entire career, before I moved to the U.S., Isidro has been, uh, the person that knew how to work with me and get from me whatever he wants, and the dancing aspect, you know it's, we fight a lot. I never forget, I never forgot I got mad once when we were doing this solo and I was sick couple weeks before I got, uh, how you call it here, chicken pox? So I spent like two weeks at home

doing nothing. Then I went back. I was weak as hell. I mean there was no muscle, there was no nothing. And now the second rehearsal, things would not happen and I got upset and I say something. And he stand up and he's like, "What? Do you want to fight?" And I look at him like, "No, I'm not talking to you." And he's like, "Yeah, you're talking to me. You want to fight? Let's go downstairs." And then he start walking out and then right in the hallway there was a broom. And he pick the broom and he's like, "Come on, I'm gonna wait for you downstairs." [laughs] That was amazing. I mean he earn so many things from that day on with me. Like. I mean I knew what, and I completely understand all his position. Like why he was doing it, uh, that he will not back from me trying to be weak and be like [sighs]. In other words, I was just being weepy, and be like, I was being Victor, you know. Being a teenager and be like, "Oh, I've been sick for two weeks. Why do you want me to dance full out now?" You know. So, but he did it and he wait for me for like 10 minutes outside the studio, and after he saw I never come back, he's like, "Well now let's dance." And then we did dance. And then from there everything started to happen again and then he started to coach me a little bit more closely and I would come down and take classes with the company and like I say he bet, he bet all his money on me. And this, you know, one of the things that life just put the right people in your life you know, and in your way. And he, I will, I will always say if, if I had to start again from the beginning I would love to have him in the way. You know, it's like this one of the person that I would never pass by and miss, ehm, because he did, he really mattered a lot to me and he really put a big, a stone there for me to step on it. And like I say he bet all his money. Was the director of the company. There were moments of doubt, of me getting principal part in the company and he was like, "No, he can do it. Just give it to him, but just give it. Don- Don't rush it." And then he knew how, how to work, he knew, with me. Because all the dancers at my time, in my process, there were dancers that they will do things just like that [snaps], and you can give, you can give them a lot. As much pressure as you want. I will take any pressure. But I have, I have a different temper at that time and I will take the pressure. But then, then if I feel that you push, you're pushing me that will be an issue there. You know. It was me being stupid and being silly and being immature. It was not me being like, "Oh, I'm a superstar and I deserve all this." No, it was nothing to do with that. It was like me being silly and stupid and immature. I mean I walk out of the room for nothing. I'll be in rehearsal and something didn't happen. He will say something and I'll get upset and I'll leave rehearsal. Nice? No it was not nice, but it was part of that process. And that's why I say if I have to do this way again, I would love to have Isidro right there again. Because through him I learned how to control all that personality, all that impulse that, it don't let you think when you're dancing. You get frustrated with yourself, but then you're not able to see the whole field. And he was, he had the passion to, to guide me, you know, and be like, "No." And he would come and like, "That was bad. That was not like that. You can do better than that." And make me understand that. I mean forget about. Maray was there all the time. I have to, I cannot forget Maray because Maray really pushed a lot for. And with that temper that I used to have. It wasn't just in that aspect, you know, I get frustrated and I will leave things quickly. I'll be like, "I'm done with this." And I will move onto something else. But it was not right for, maybe in real life or regular life would be okay, but rehearsals, being a dancer, being on the stage. Not, it was not cool. And, but. But yeah those uh UNIAC festivals they, they did mark a huge, uh, part of my life because it kind of gave me the sense of what was the potential that I have. Because you're not just competing with your peers in the school, it was national. So there would be a kid from Santiago, from Camagüey, and there you, you putting yourself against everybody. So that, that's when you realize. And then after that I did many other things. I did, I start my pre-professional practice with Retazos, and then for like almost six months, and then later they went Ecuador. And then I continued my pre-professional practice with Danza Combinatoria Rosario Cardenas. I stayed there for almost, yeah almost a year, I will say. Oh until I

graduate, and then at the same time, around that time ?? Iglesias and Victor Cuellar was still in Cuba. And he was alive at that time. They went to, they went to see a performance that we have with Danza Combinatoria in, uh, Iglesia de Paula I think by Havana Vieja, small church. It was the festival, International Festival of Electroacoustic Music. I think that we were dancing to music from Juan Pineda, something like that. And I think the name of the choreography is something America. It was kind of, it was nice. It was interesting choreography. And they went to see it. And that was on Saturday and then Monday morning we went to take class in the company and they talk to us to let us know that we got accepted to do the pre-professional training with the company.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:26:56] And that was you and Maray or?

**Victor Alexander** [00:26:57] That was, no, me and another guy Tah- Ta- ?? One of my best friend later, I mean and during the school and we danced in the company for many years together. But yeah, but Maray is one year younger than me in the school, yeah. And you know it was, it was amazing, all that process with the school. But most important for me, like I said those mixed feelings, it was how to define and let grow that passion for and the love for the dance. But also being able, being able to, to handle all the personal issues, you know, on the side. Which... they were not fun, you know. Now you're looking back and it's like it was, it was great, but at the moment you're just a little kid so. Yeah.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:27:56] So when did you formally join Danza Contemporánea? What year?

**Victor Alexander** [00:28:03] Uh, I join Danza 1990, I start dancing with Danza in the summer of 1991.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:28:10] Okay.

**Victor Alexander** [00:28:11] For the Pan-American Games in Cuba.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:28:16] Oh, wow.

**Victor Alexander** [00:28:16] I was about to finish the school that year and then go home for vacation. We had three months of vacation in Cuba. You know in the summer we not going summer intensive. We not do nothing. We really take the vacation. And Esteban Delgado, one of the dancers from the company who was the husband of Idania Wambrug, which they both are the parents of Osnel Delgado, the director of Malpaso.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:28:52] Yeah.

**Victor Alexander** [00:28:53] They, he asked me, he say, "Hey. We are short a dancer." Because there were some dances that were doing other guest artists. And he said, "We are short a dancer for this season that we have in the summer for Pan, the opening of the Pan American Games. The director, ah, told me to ask if you would be interested in perform with us." I said, "Well, okay." He said, "Well you're not going to have a vacation." I said, "Well, it's okay. Can I have the next weekend?" He said yes. So I went for the weekend, I went to Pinar del Rio. I saw my mom. I explained to my mom what was happening. She understand, she said, "You know, if that is what you want. You must go." So I went. I did my two months with Danza. And that was a kick in the butt because for me that was what, it really finalize the whole possible. Not spending time in the studio with students anymore. We're spending time in the studio. We're talking about eight hours with

professional dancers from all ages. From the one that are have five years in the company, which was the latest that they hired people from before I got there. Seven years, sorry, until 67 years old that they will go just and take class and go back. But they will observe you when you are in class and be like, "This can be better. You can do this better than that. Fix the hip. Fix that." You know. So you get all this many different advice for people that really spend time on the stage. And that was what really finished the post, and then later I started in the school and Miguel told me, "You know, I'm gonna start putting you in the rep of the company. So I'm gonna talk to the school, so you can be couple days in the week here with us rehearsing." So I started officially dancing with the Danza Contemporánea in the summer of 1991 and as a professional dancer officially, like getting paid and everything, ah, 1992 when I finished at ENA.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:31:13] And that was the beginning of the Special Period.

**Victor Alexander** [00:31:15] That was the beginning of the Special Period in Cuba.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:31:17] So what was that experience like being a young professional, new professional dancer, just graduated, and exciting moment for your career and also this crisis happening around you?

**Victor Alexander** [00:31:33] Ooph. It, it was, it was confusing because, you know, you finish the school and then you join the National Company, where you start with the minimum salary, right? So that's what you dream all your life, "Oh man. When I, when I make my own money." It was not worth it. I mean you take your, at that time we were getting paid 148 Cuban pesos, which in the middle of the special period that equivalent to that with one dollar a month. So but with one dollar, you walk up to the corner because there was not food anywhere. You know the, the government stopped sending food to institutions, and we were one of affected one. And so you spend all day dancing. If you don't bring anything from home, you, the cafeteria was like pff, cemetery, you know, it's like no nothing here. And you walk out of the company on the street to find some, find some food and. You'll find pizza for a dollar. So a dollar will be all salary. Are so you drop your salary. You take it here, and then you drop it there. And that's it, you don't have more money for the rest of the month. I mean I got support. My, my youngest uncle was living in Havana and I was living with him. My mother was still you know young and she was working and once in a while she still had to send me money, until I started traveling with the company and join officially company in September, September 1992. And I did my first tour with the company in November 1992. So when you start touring, then you get more, your per diem here and there, and then that kind of help a little bit, but it was not, it was not easy. It was hard. It was hard to dancing for six, five, eight hours. With, if you're able to bring something from home good, but if not just with water. Or sugar and water. You know, we called it agua con azúcar or agua ? [chuckles] And also to keep it, keep your body going and, but it affect me more. Not myself but it affect me more seeing other families that were really suffering the whole Special Period. That really affected me a lot more. It was tough. It was tough because there was no transportation. So I used to live in Lawton. I walk every day, I would have to walk into the company or, we didn't star until 9:30, the class in the company don't start until 9:30. I would have to wake up at 4 a.m. to be able to get in the bus maybe at eight, maybe at six. So if I catch the bus at 6:00a.m. I'll be in the company from like seven all the way until we finish rehearsal at 4:00p.m. I would not walk, and be late and then having the director just yelling in your face because you're late. And then we having a tour. Or we having a group of sponsors to come and see the company so we can go on tour to festival, and I'm late because of the transportation in Cuba at that time. Also it create all that frustration, it create all that anxiety, but we have the outlet. We

have the dance. And then we were able to just let go and then leave that daily experience and then let it go. And there was a good creative process at that time with a few different choreographies, and I think we were able to outlet all that. But I think, uh, it build me strong. It did, it build me strong because I learned to, to focus on what I have to. I mean it kind of become this myth of, "Okay. Once I get there, I have to just focus on dance, drink my water, keep dancing." I was able to bring some food from home because I have family in the countryside, and we have small farms and stuff like that. And they were able to kind of keep you know feeding our family and stuff like that. But there were a lot of dancers that they were not able to do that. So it's all that big mix of who and what and how, you know. So and in the middle that, you know, you don't know how to really, you were not in the position to express yourself politically. You were not. I mean you, you part of this whole big political bubble, and then you have to become part of those small organizations. Like they call it at that time this like UJC was the union for young Communists. Yeah. You know you have to be part of all those things and.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:37:23] Was it a requirement for the company, uh, to be, uh, a member of UJC?

**Victor Alexander** [00:37:28] It was not a requirement. But. I think if you're smart, just do it. [laughs] I mean not to fight with it, just, just do it.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:37:41] Did you have regular meetings?

**Victor Alexander** [00:37:44] You have regular meetings every month. You have to, you have to do your duties. You have to pay your duties, you pay like your fee, you pay like two Cuban pesos every morning. I was one of the leaders in that organization as well. You know you have to go to meetings. You have to go to meeting with, for the district, and then listen to things that you don't want to listen. Argue with people, like have an argument once with some of the representative, because he said, "Well you guys come here whenever you want. And you guys never speak up." And it's like why I wanna speak up? You guys never speak about art. Everything that I hear here, it's nothing is about the art. So do you guys care about it? No. So might as well, I just coming, give you the report, give you the money, and bye-bye. You know and I'm, I, I was a little bit more regal at that time, and sometime I will speak too much and I would get in trouble because I will say things that I knew that I was not supposed to say, but I didn't say it in the wrong way or like, because I want to be against the government or against the politics or nothing. It was just, it was a human sense. And, but they didn't see it like that. No. They see that whatever you say that is not what they think. It goes against the system, you know. And like I always say I have nothing against the system. The reason why I'm in the United States today is because I wanted, I wanna try many of the different artistic experience and I was looking to establish my, my life. I was looking not just me as an artist, but also create my own family as I have today you know. So. But the Special Period is hard. It was hard. And I think people from that, that generation still remember, and they can remember always. I mean. I met up with some of my friends once in a while when I go to Spain for our summer intensive audition and workshops. And he was there during that process. And then we, we talk once in a while, and he was hard. I mean he was living in Diezmero, like really far away, and he would bike. And we had that whole experience, the biking thing. I mean we got this protection from China. Like it was like lots and lots and lots of Chinese bikes, and the government say, "Okay, here we go. We're gonna have bikes. We don't have transportatin, but you can have bikes now." And people will pass out on the street because yeah you bike but you don't have fuel, you don't have food. So.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:40:42] So in this, cause you were at, in, with Danza for these ten years, right?

**Victor Alexander** [00:40:47] Yeah.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:40:47] About '92 to 2002. Tell me a little bit about important choreographers that you worked with, particular pieces that were really important for you during your time in the company.

**Victor Alexander** [00:40:59] Yeah, well from 1992, I did uh, to 2002. I work with many different choreographers there and I think each one of them really add a lot to, to uh my book, right? Like I say I did choreographies from Isidro Rolando. I got to rehearse with Victor Cuellar, one of the biggest choreographers in Cuba for Danza Contemporánea at that time.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:41:29] Would you, because there's so little information about Victor but he was so important, can you tell me a little bit about working with him and what that was like and what pieces you did of his?

**Victor Alexander** [00:41:40] I did from his pieces, I did T- La Vida. It was kind of funny thing. I did Panorama of the music and the dance, it's one of his classic. I learned Michelangelo but never get to perform. I learn it but never get to perform Michelangelo. What else I learn from Victor? I learned something else from his choreography. Don't remember right now. But yeah but I mean working with him at that time. I think my time it was probably like six months or so and after that he came to Miami and you know. I got to see him later in Jamaica, the company was touring and he traveled to Jamaica to meet up with the company and see the dancers and. But, so he was just you know getting in and out. I think for his time, I think he was amazing, just the way that, the way that he would create, especially with Panorama, the one that I performed the most. It was Panorama of the music and dance in Cuba. And just the way that he recreate our own culture, things that we forget a lot now, we are just focus as uh Cubans we just mention the Afro-Cubans and the Spanish. And whatever we have today, right? But then we forget that before the Africans and before Christopher Columbus get to Cuba, we have Indians as well. And he recreate all that passage of that time in Cuba, of that cultural scene in Cuba, so well and, and the way that he showed and he break down different dances like, I can remember one, the one that I remember the most. Because it was, it was fun, but it was hard too. It was a contradanza. 'Cause you will see, during that piece you will see them both, you will see the traditional dance and then you will see the modern dance. So he disqualified the whole thing and then he create a modern choreography with the mambo. I mean using all your Cuban and your different articulation of your body the mambo were hysterical. They cont- the contradanza was one of the most exciting one because you have this mix of, uh, well at that time the company was a big mix of the Afro-Cuban roots and the ballet, and it was pure technique. Every single choreography that you did at that time was pure technique. It was basically from the studio to the stage, you know. But I mean the danzón, the danzón, the, well we did the contradanza. We did rumba. Conga. Conga was hysterical because it was just the end, where you will see the traditional conga, and then you will see the disqualification of the regular modern conga and the way that he did it. I mean how he did that that many years ago. It was crazy, it was insane. Any, that piece was, it was a stamp for the company in Cuba. I think during, for some time, there were not a place where you will travel and the company would not bring that piece as part of the repertory, you know. So I worked that. I did work with Isidro Rolando, I say. Uh, Eduardo Rivero. I got to, to do I mean one of the classics for the Cuban modern dance, Sulkari.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:45:28] Tell me about doing Sulkari.

**Victor Alexander** [00:45:30] Sulkari I learned, uh, oh I was in love with Sulkari since I was 12 years old. First time I saw it I was blown away. Blow my mind. I was like, "What the hell is that?" And the, the music, it stick in your head and the movement and pictures and the image, everything is there. So finally join the company. It's funny because while I was in the school, there were three girls that were getting ready for the competition for the UNIAC. And they got to learn the solos from Sulkari. Because you have to learn some repertory piece. So they got to learn that, they got to learn a solo from Sulkari. I never got to learn anything like that and I joined the company and I think two years later--yeah two years later--they, they decide to do a new cast. And there were three new dancers in the company and three female dancers in the company. Brand new that will be the new cast and with ?? and with Pablo Trujillo, one of the, I mean one of the first cast from Sulkari, him, Isidro Rolando. And I think it was [name], the other one. And I got to learn Sulkari with Isidro and Pablo. And then a few weeks later in the process, Eduardo Rivero, he was not in the company anymore. He was already with Danza Caribe in Santiago. And then he came to, to the company. So but the funny thing is that when I was living in Lawton, I lived one block away from Eduardo Rivero. So I got to meet his family, his son, his daughter and. But that was the worst part because then he will be in the company in the morning rehearsing Sulkari with us. I mean that was an amazing experience. You know have the choreographer for that piece right there, you know telling you all those little secrets, and, but then I see him in the company and then when I finish at night and I will coming up to my place I will see him sitting on his porch. Then he was, "Ay, Victor." And then I would have to go in and sit and there would, that would be the correction time. He would be like, "Oh this part here? You can do this, you can do more pli e here. You can do this. You can do that." So he can. But it was, it was a nice. It was beautiful experience. It was not for too long. But I did Sulkari from uh Rivero. I did Tribute, he set a piece based on the whole Caribbean thing in Jamaica specifically because he have a strong connection with Jamaica. And I got to learn Okantom , one of his other classic in the company. I never get to do it, but I got to learn. And then I work. Those are the choreographers from that big time, you know. But then I got to work with, uh, Narciso Medina. I got to do, uh, that was one of my first strong piece that really bring a lot of self study. For me. Uh, Metamorfosis. One of his, still you know. And yeah, that, that really, it push you a lot because you jump into something that, yeah, you study in the school composition choreographic how to be an insect, how to be an animal. But from there to really bring it to the stage with that level of interpretation and physicality that the piece has. It was hard. And ?? from Narciso I had to learn. I learned Metamorfosis, I did perform Metamorfosis for several years. Basically like almost a year or two before I came to the U.S. I was still performing Metamorfosis. Um, Grano de Oro, one of his other amazing piece. ?? from Narciso. And then I work a lot with, in my time I did work a lot with L dice N n ez. Is, uh, was one of the biggest choreographer in Cuba at that time. She basically put the repertory of the company on her shoulders and roll away. And with L dice that was the peak of, like I would say I become a real dancer in terms of the mix of feelings and technique and everything. We did uh. One of my favorites from her. And that really created a huge bond between four dancers, and that we still, you know, connected. [names]. She choreographed a piece that's called Magnets ???. And that piece. Yeah that was like, that was. That was the piece for us to really break everything like cry, laugh after we finish. Know what happened to each one of the cast without even talk. Like being able to just feel who is dancing with you. Without even count. Just by the air we created. I mean that bond that we created it was like, I never had that before and I never had it again. You know. Is, it was the four of us. We, we become one. We'll dance by each one feelings. And during that process each one of us went through different stage

and changes in life and in our life, and that we mark us like but tremendously. We did many other pieces from Lídice. We did [name], Tempesta. Uh. We did [name]. [name]. What else? She choreographed for the woman, but she created huge thing in the company, really wide repertory for just her pieces. But then I got to work also with Giovanni Cicco, choreographer from Italy. Joacuin Sabaté from Spain, Barcelona. Eh. Jan Linkens, which was, who was the one that really at that moment he kind of like give it 360 degree turn to the company, and make the company start looking completely different. We did a piece for him called [name]. That was, uh, that was a big transition for the company at that time. With those three European choreographer, the company went like [whistles] boom, and that's it, you know. Choreographer from here, from United States, Alfonso S--, he was ex-Joffrey dance, too. Uh, what else? Oh man. Yeah, I think in Cuba those were, those were the choreographers. René de Cárdenas. Yeah I mean no but uh. It's, ah, all this almost ten years in the company in Cuba. It was a, it was a huge school. When I went to, I did what, I coming was that 2002, and then I performed back in Cuba again with Hedwig, 2015. I was having a conversation after that performance with one of the youngest dancers in, in the company Danza and then he was asking me so, no because almost everybody expect like you stay for a little bit and then you go somewhere else and it's like was it worth it to stay those ten years? Like, yeah. I mean I did learn a lot. It did teach me a lot and it prepare me for what I'm doing now. You know here we have everything, they feed us like babies. Right. You do this, you do that. And then when you go to the States and then you don't want to dance in a big company anymore. And then you become freelance. But how are you going to manage that? You don't have a director who telling you what to do. You don't have a teacher in class that is interested in you. No, you go, you pay \$15 per class and that's it. If you work, good. If you don't work, you're wasting your money. And then you have to manage your own time. You have to be able, what do you want, what you are really interested in. And I think being in Danza it kind of like give me that broad view of what I really want to do when I get here. You know.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:55:00] And, um, that's a perfect transition to asking what-

**Victor Alexander** [00:55:04] Are we at the 4 hours range, yet?

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:55:16] [laughs] No.

**Victor Alexander** [00:55:16] [laughs]

**Jenai Cutcher** [00:55:16] It is long though. When you said that I was like, yeah.

**Victor Alexander** [00:55:16] [laughs]

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:55:16] Uh, what went into your. What was the process for getting here in 2002? Was it unexpected or? How did it, how did it come about?

**Victor Alexander** [00:55:28] When we end up here in 2002, we were not expecting to come to the U.S. We were, uh, before we came to the U.S. we, we had to basically draw a proposal--propose? Yeah, you can say proposal? If I propose a work for you.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:55:48] Mhm.

**Victor Alexander** [00:55:48] Yeah. Okay. [laughs] That we had from Netherlands, with the company Netherlands because we were touring there when then Miguel Iglesias want us to come back to Cuba to perform something for Chuck Davis. He was in Cuba and then he

want to see the company, so and Maray and I at that time were aiming to get that contract in Netherlands. For four months. We didn't want to stay, we wanted, the contract was for four months. We want to just go there, work just four month. The idea, you know like every Cuban that, that have to go back to Cuba, it was like go, work, make the connection, make the money. Us being able to go.

[00:56:30] [phone ringing]

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:56:30] Do you wanna-

**Jenai Cutcher** [00:56:30] Do you want me to get it?

**Victor Alexander** [00:56:30] No

**Jenai Cutcher** [00:56:30] Okay. Let's just pause until it's done then.

**Victor Alexander** [00:56:46] So [laughs]

**Elizabeth Schwall** [00:56:50] So you were in Nether- you just wanted to get this four months in Netherlands.

**Victor Alexander** [00:56:53] Yeah. So we wanted just, you know, have that experience, that experience of going, work with a different company, work with different choreographers. And of course like I say like every other Cuban dreams there. If you're thinking going back to the country was like, put a little bit of money together, maybe go back, being able to find our own place because we were living with my in-laws right. So find our own place, so we can start our own family. Or have our own space. And Miguel at the end, like a week before we went to Netherland, he said, "Oh, you guys. I said yes, but now you have to come back because we have this performance here" and blah blah blah. So it was a hard time there but. Anyway we went back to Cuba. We did the performance and all that. And then later with Carlos Acosta, Nacho Duato's sister was in Cuba and then, we were really good friends and then he told us, "Hey, Nacho Duato's sister is here, so we might can send your videos back with her to Nacho and." So we did it and meanwhile we were waiting for that answer, Donna Faye, the dean of the American Dance Festival at that time, she went to Cuba with American group. And she saw the company. She went to see us rehearsing in the, in the studio. She went to see us perform in the Garcia Lorca. And then, this, there was American dancer in Cuba taking class. Abby Simon, I think is her name. And you know, a week later Abby had to come back to the U.S. and then they, she met, uh, Donna in the, in Florida airport and they start talking and she's like, "Oh you know I wanted to ask you about those dancers." And then she asked about Maray and myself. And she's like, "Oh actually they were interested, you know, they're interested in trying to get opportunities, uh, performing outside of Cuba." And she said, "Oh great because I would love to do that." So she sent us the invitation letter. But we were thinking like, "Oh we'll go there. Stay for the six week of the program and then we come back." So. No we never come back. [laughs] We decided to do it and it was not our goal to stay in the U.S. Our idea was coming, learn as much as we can, go back and hoping to get the Danza Nacional de Spain, Nacho Duato's company. That was our hope. Uh. Well we got an e-mail from them. We were already here and, but we decide to, we already had decided to stay. We, we spent the time there and then we start seeing opportunity. You know, we start seeing companies there. We saw Paul Taylor, Trisha Brown, Shen Wei Dance Art, uh. Oh. Many companies, many years guys, don't hope me to remember that. [laughs] But, um, and then we, you know, we talked to dancers. And we

took every single workshop that we can take and every single master class that we can take from all those companies. And we would have good feedback, even, this when things get weird, you know, because even though you know you're coming from a national company when you're principal dancer and everything, you get to another place, and it's always you put that seed of doubt in yourself that I mean kind of take confidence away from you. So we start getting all of those comments, and Maray had family here and then we decide to come and visit family. You know they left Cuba almost 20 years before we came here so. We find Hedwig. We decided to take class and started doing things and see what happened. And we found Hedwig, we show our promotional video, we went and take class with the company. We did audition for the company and that's it. You know, it was, it was easy. No, no. It was a hell of a hard time for, only for two years, being able to let go too many things. Um. First is, you know, make a decision, like we want stay, this gonna be our life from now on. It's going to be our place from now on. And face the stage of new language, new weather, new society, everything was new. So you have, you're reborn again. And we didn't know how to do it. We just went and do it. We dance with, we meet Eduardo Vilaro later on. And he was directing Luna Negra. And he auditioned us for his company. We performed with Luna Negra for almost two years. One of the dancers from Luna Negra brought me here. To take class with Larry to do the Nutcracker. And when I came here and I took class with Larry and I did the Nutcracker with him.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:02:35] What, what, what role?

**Victor Alexander** [01:02:36] Oh, I did everything. [chuckles] You know what you do when you first got to here and nobody knows you, you know? I did mice. I did Russians. I did Spanish. And whatever else they will tell me to do I will do it. You know. I just want people to see me.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:02:55] How long were you with Hedwig before you met Eduardo Vilaro?

**Victor Alexander** [01:02:59] Oh we start dancing with Eduardo and Hedwig and Luna Negra at the same time simultaneously. Yeah it was, it was crazy because we would be rehearsing with Hedwig from 9:00 a.m. or. Yeah I think it was 9 a.m. or 8 a.m. all the way until 2:00p.m. Then, we finished at the Chicago Cultural Center, and then we take the Milwaukee bus. Then we'll get out at Milwaukee and Chicago Avenue, they were rehearsing in the Chicago Academy. And then we were rehearse there until 9, 10 a.m. Ah, 10 p.m. Almost every other day with them. And then like that. We did that for almost two year with Luna Negra until we decide to move on.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:03:46] And what was the experience like with Luna Negra when you were there?

**Victor Alexander** [01:03:52] For us it was, I think for us, uh, I'm gonna speak for both of us, for Maray and myself. But in my case, kind of was the combination of what we were missing still from Cuba because. Hedwig work is completely different to what Luna Negra was doing, so the combination of doing Hedwig a little bit here, then go and do Luna Negra here, which was more, uh, the [colectivismo?] was a lot more, the technical difficulties, in different aspects, more balletic. Ah, it was, it was there. So it was that mix that we were still used to do in Cuba, and I think two things will work, complement what we were missing. Even though I have to say when I saw Danza Contemporánea, I think 2002, back again 2011 at the Joyce Theater. I mean it was, it was a dream come true, and I was like, "[whispers] Oh man. Wow." Because I was longing that for many years, but not just that, I

would go and see other company and that that was all, I mean all my memories were in Danza Contemporánea. I spent 10 years there. So I see another company and it was a mix of many things, like watching this company having fun and enjoying it, but at the same time knowing all that, recording of what happened in Danza Contemporánea during the time that I was there. So. But I think, I had a nice time in Luna Negra. It was, it was demanding because of the physicality. And it's not, it was hard because it's not a full- It was not a full time company when I performed with them, you know, it was, was a part time company. It was hard because there you trying to do in three hours what you can do in five. So everything was rushing. Rehearsal was rushing, everything was rushing, and not, uh. You know and then you don't have the time to really, ah, get everything in your body. And which I learned, later I learned about how things work here right? And I admire a lot of those things and I appreciate and I value that now. But in the beginning for me everything was wrong. Like what they doing? Why you just premiered this piece today and then tomorrow you choreographing something else? And then you put than one in the garbage. And then you're not doing it anymore. What for? You know. And then later I, I learned that it's all those grants and all those commissions, and you had to choreograph for this and that. But in the beginning for me everything was wrong. You know nothing makes sense. For me it doesn't make sense to start dance, taking class at 4 p.m. and then you rehearse until 10 p.m. I was like, "This is all wrong. It's not right." Having dancers that, "Oh, I cannot be here tomorrow because ah"--that was mostly at Luna too--"because I have to work." Where you work? "Oh no, I work in the store, I work in the restaurant, I cannot change my shift." And all that for me, the first year, nothing makes sense. Hedwig it was, uh, kind of give us a little bit more time to process and kind of get us in doing what we want to do at that time. We were able to create, we were able to, to do stuff. Luna Negra was more like a repertory company. Would be Gustavo Ramirez coming in, or Eduardo Vilaro choreographing, and oh, there was a guy from Mexico that did one of, a really nice piece from Luna Negra, the piece, it was named Fisuras. I forgot the name of the choreographer. Mexican. Ah, but you know it was like [snapping] this this this this. And then you have one month off, and then you're coming back and a week later you have a performance. So there is no time and then you learn that you have to, your free time, to keep taking classes and to keep doing the stuff, which in Cuba, no. We finish the season in August, or June, and then you don't start working again until mid-August. When you start in mid-August you don't have a show on 20th. The show will be probably September 20, but then you have all that time to get back. So I, like I say, I learned from everything. I had an amazing time with Luna Negra. I had a good relationship with Eduardo. Later in the time I got to teach for the company. I teach for almost a year, a year and a half I think, for the company which was a completely different experience. Maray got to choreograph, also for the company, which was a completely different experience too. And see the transition of the company, go for a part time company to become a full time company. That was nice, um, and with Hedwig, uh, yeah. I mean I have an amazing time. I stayed with Hedwig for almost 15 years.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:09:29] And so, um, was during that time that you started choreographing or had you started choreographing back in Cuba?

**Victor Alexander** [01:09:35] No I never choreograph just my, except when I had to do it and I was forced to do it. I don't even want to when I was in Cuba. [laughs] In Cuba we did learn a lot with, uh. We really had to put everything that we learned in, in the composition class in Cuba in practice when we start working with Lidice Nuñez. Because she will come in and, and she will bring a lot of ideas, and then you have to improvise. And basically you collaborate a lot during the choreography process. So... there yeah we we all can say- [phone ringing again]

[01:10:14] [video cuts for a moment]

**Victor Alexander** [01:10:25] So where were we?

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:10:28] Uh, I was asking you about choreography?

**Victor Alexander** [01:10:29] Yeah. So.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:10:31] Like when you started here I guess.

**Victor Alexander** [01:10:31] Yeah so I would say that all the group of dancers that worked with Lídice at that time, we can all say that we learn how to choreograph there because we have to support and collaborate. But my first work I did it here. I did it with, uh, Hedwig, and it was, uh. It was part of that transition and probably missing things, right. And also the, yeah I have to say that a connection of not appreciate, you know, we are, how we are as a human, right? We don't appreciate a lot, a lot of things sometimes. And then later when we don't have it, or when we are separated away from them, is when we see it. And I was, I choreographed the piece, my first piece that I choreographed for Hedwig, call Never Late. And it was basically based on, on the old dancers. I mean that 50, 60 years old generation that, that, and I started seeing it on Jan, you know, because I see when she was talking to us and she was doing stuff when then, through Jan I started seeing all the dancers that we have in Cuba at that time, that they were our rehearsal director, like Isidro Rolano, Margarita Vilela, Isabel Blanco, [two more names]. So that through us, dancing will live in their life, right. So and well sometimes we didn't appreciate that and then we don't realize that, and then we were just young and not seeing what the reality was. So I did that, that was my first piece, and then later I did another duet with Maray. And then I think I choreographed something for Momenta. And then after that- [laughter outside] You good?

**Jenai Cutcher** [01:12:47] [laughs]

**Victor Alexander** [01:12:47] [softly] I can tell him to shut up. [yelling] Rohan!

??? [01:12:49] What?

**Victor Alexander** [01:12:50] Quiet. [pauses, listening] We do an interview here. [door opens] You, too. That one is laughing like crazy. I'll talk to you later.

??? [01:13:09] Alright. I might not be here, I gotta go places.

**Victor Alexander** [01:13:09] How, how, how-

??? [01:13:09] If I can get out of here by like 2:15, that would be ideal.

**Victor Alexander** [01:13:13] Okay. [to interviewers] Sorry guys, sorry. No, no, listen Jacob. In Studio 4.

??? [01:13:18] Yes.

**Victor Alexander** [01:13:19] I want it, I want you to help me.

??? [01:13:21] Okay.

**Victor Alexander** [01:13:21] Give me an idea and [softly] maybe give me a budget. [laughs] I want to do the set that we did for Line of Sighs. You remember? Those pulls like that.

??? [01:13:31] Uh-huh.

**Victor Alexander** [01:13:31] I want to do it on this side of the AC, behind the barres.

??? [01:13:37] Okay, I'm gonna go up there and look at this so it makes more sense.

**Victor Alexander** [01:13:39] Yeah and then at the other end-

??? [01:13:40] Okay.

**Victor Alexander** [01:13:40] At the end of the studio, I w- I have the two by four here that have the hoops. I want to drill that in the floor.

??? [01:13:49] So you wanna put the bars-

**Victor Alexander** [01:13:50] The bars are here, the, the pipes here, and the wood down there at the end and then another w- wood at the bottom for the pad that they hold the.

??? [01:13:59] Sure.

**Victor Alexander** [01:13:59] And they go on flat.

??? [01:14:00] That shouldn't be too hard.

**Victor Alexander** [01:14:03] Let me know.

??? [01:14:05] I'm gonna look at it.

**Victor Alexander** [01:14:06] Okay, thank you. [laughs] Um. So. Going back to work. So we, we, uh, I did that choreography for Hedwig, and then I didn't do anything else. I did a few other things, you know, in the studios where you teach in the suburbs here and there, but nothing, nothing that will, uh. Make a jump you know. And I think that the, the first real thing. And I, I can say it, the first real choreography that I did and I cannot say I did it like just me, you know, it was a huge collaboration too with the dancers. It was Line of Sighs. That was a choreography that I really invest time, everything. You know I put my life out there, and my idea was that it was not even me doing the choreography. I got invited through Deborah Valoma, which she was my collaborator at that time, it's a weaver artist from San Francisco. And I got invited to Portland to improvise. She wanted to do a video, a dance film about it. It's like, the video, I have the video somewhere, it's like eight minutes long, no more than that. I went in, I went straight from the airport to the place, to the gallery. I saw the gallery, I saw the installation. I like it. I play a little bit with the bungee cords. Oh nice. Went back next day to improv and, but then through the night I had a hard time to focus on my sleeping because I was focusing on the bungee cord. And in the morning I woke up, I talked to the, Deborah, I asked about the idea. She told me the ideas. And I went into the space again and take, start taking pictures and send it to Maray. Like, "Maray, look at this piece. Look at how great is this. Imagine if Hedwig can do something

with this." So I spent the whole day improvising. They set four cameras and it was music and I will improvise and when I feel tired, I will take a break, and people will come in and out. It was open all day, and then they will go in day and when the moments where I would be performing, oh there will probably be nobody when I'll be performing right so. I finish, but I really kind of like this idea. But for me, the idea was too small. And I come home with that idea and I keep talking to Maray, and talking to Maray, and I told Jan. And I showed the pictures and I showed the video and Jan was like, "Well, here's what can happen. Illinois Arts Council, they gonna, they have a grant that's coming out pretty soon. And Chicago Dancemaker Forum have this grant coming up pretty soon. How about you apply and then you do the choreography?" And I told Jan, no. She's like, "Yeah, you have the idea. You tell me, but you already have the idea." I said, "Well. Okay." But as I always say, my first reaction to that when she told me's like, Why I want to apply for the Chicago Dancemakers Forum? I mean, every single person that I have seen getting that work, or that I know, they all run companies or they are teaching at Columbia College. Me? I'm not running the company. I'm not teaching at Columbia College. I'm a dancer. And on top of that, I'm an immigrant. Why I'm gonna get it? Why they gonna give it to me? That was my first reaction. And Jan say, "Well you are not lose anything. Just try." I had on my side, that when I talk to Deborah Valoma about it. One of her specialties, she's a grant writer, so she helped me a lot with that. And you know we got Illinois Art Council. I start working on the piece. I did a trio first with Michel Rodriguez and Edson Cabrera. Eh, which I'm gonna call Shino and Edson. And then, uh, later I have to do the full length of the project for the Chicago Dancemakers Forum. Jacob was my lighting designer. And you know I really put everything there. Even though when I, when I get the grants, both of them, I didn't believe it. I went through the whole year. I went through the whole process, and I believe it when I finish because meanwhile for me it was, I was living a dream. 'Cause, ah, first I always say I can put pieces together. Choreographer? I don't know. I mean I'm a big fan of Ohad Naharin and Susan Marshall. And lately I become a big fan of Lines. Alonzo King, just mostly for, I mean his work is amazing, but mostly he have been, they have been posting a few pieces about him when he's talking with the new, young dancers and what he say is so true, is so transparent. It's the real life, no? So but I never imagined that I can call myself a choreographer. Now I can pull things together and try to make something happen. But like that full name of choreographer. No, I'm not living out of that. That is not the only thing that I'm doing, you know. So, but yeah Line of Sighs was the big, was the big thing. Line of Sighs I can say it really marked my, my entire life. And that was my turning point. From there on my life changed a lot because before Line of sighs I was not motivated about anything. I was about to stop dancing. And go to culinary, culinary arts school and become a chef. There was not motivation for me anymore about dance because every- I used to dance with CDI, it's the modern dance company from here, from Ruth Page, and Jan. But everybody that I would go and dance with it. That was no motivation for me anymore. It was, was you have to improvise a lot. You had to work with so many other people's idea and it kind of burn you out. And I was at that stage, was like, like that I have nothing to do here. The physicality is not making me excited anymore and create it not make me excited anymore. So I was about to throw the towel and walk away. I went to a Cordon Bleu, a school that is here, when I had my interview. I have a walk through in the school, I pick up all my package, and in two weeks before I decide not to do it I just have to stop by and pick up my uniform. My hat, my thing, and my ?? [laughs] and become a chef. And in those two weeks everything happened. In those two weeks I went to Portland to do that. Then worked with Deborah. And I come back from there and the day before I was like, "I think I'm going to wait a little bit." And Maray say, "Yeah. I think that's the best." Maray was not happy with it. She was not on the same page with me. And she said, "I will let you bump into the wall and then you will find out." You know. And yeah like I said, Line of Sighs, it was the turning point, from there everything it start to go in

completely different path, uh. Start working on the piece, it become, uh, to Zach. Just, it become one 25 to Watch for the Dance Magazine. That was another thing. He sent me like three e-mails and then he sent to Maray, and everybody was upset with me because I don't reply any e-mail. And Maray called me like, "Have you seen Zach's email?" Is like, "I have not seen anybody's email." "Well, he call you and he leave you a voicemail." "Well I don't have Zach's number." Like I have like four phone calls, and I don't know who it is, but check the voicemail. So I check the voicemail and they was Zach, saying that he sent the article about myself for the Dance Magazine and he got to be one of the, they choose his one. So I was like, "Oh. Oh, okay." How that's gonna happen, you know, it's things that you never expect and at that point, a lot of things coming back to me. Oh man, I always watch because I, when I go to the studio where I teach, I see it and I see the Dance Magazine, and I remember a lot, uh, Alejandro Cerrudo and this. And I was like, "Look at this guys. Wow. No?" And at one point I was like completely off, and like, "Oh. Is this gonna happen? How this gonna happen? With my work? I didn't choreograph for Hubbard Street, I'm not choreographing for anybody, you know. It's just for Hedwig." But it get me through the 25 to Watch, and then from there Line of Sighs become one of the best 10 works, ten, top ten for, for the 2013, uh, in the Tribune. And it start open doors and it take time but it helped me to, Line of Sighs, like I say, was a turning point but it helped me to bring my voice out and let people know who really I am and what I really want to do and where I want to go with the dance. And yeah I did, I did things. I worked with Chicago Lyric Opera for seven seasons back to back, doing everything. I mean meeting all those famous opera singer, visiting the same dressing room or in the same lounge room having lunch, talking, ah, you know talking about different experience. I did I don't know how many productions there, almost two every year. That was good. I was a guest artist for Hubbard Street, I never got to perform with them on the stage. But I was there. You know everybody's dream here in Chicago is being in Hubbard Street. For me was in the beginning when I first got here in 2002. After that it was not anymore. Uh. We'll just start doing things and, and then you realize that there is a lot much more that you can do than not just being in one place. I did audition once for Bill T. Jones, which was, I mean it was a disaster because I didn't want to go. One of the dancers from Luna Negra keep insisting like, "You should go, you should go, you should go." I finally decide to go. I reply, I sent an email that night, like almost midnight. I went and I took the, I went to, took the bus in Fullerton, Maray and I we were living here in Chicago still [laughs]. Take the bus, get on the red line. When I transferred in the red line I take the green line but that was not what take me to the Columbia College. So when I realized I was in Ashland somewhere else, like, "Oh, man, it's already 10 a.m. I'm late and I'm lost." I went back. I went in and Bill T. Jones look at me and I told him like yeah and he's like "Come on. We just start five minutes ago." I did the entire class, I learned what he did. And then he invited me to go to the big audition workshop in New York. But then at that time, you know, I was doing the Lyric, I was doing guest artist for Nutcracker here and there. And it was hard for me to step out, and I really don't want to move anywhere at that time it was, it was just me and I didn't come here by myself, Maray and I we came together so. I was like, "I'm not gonna move to New York because I have a job and Maray doesn't have it." It w- It's not fair, it's not fair, right. So I decided not to, I send them an email. And then later, you know I, after that this amazing opportunity that I have now being the director of, of Ruth Page. I was rehearsing this student from ? for the ACDFA. And after I finished, Venetia was the head of the dance department there and and after we finished she said, "Victor, let me ask you something, you know since L- since Larry pass away we've been looking for directors and, but we didn't find a person that we want yet. Would you be interested in doing this?" I was like, "Well. I don't know." Venetia's like, "Well, you always told me that you want to be in one place, that you're getting tired of driving to the suburbs come back to the city and rehearse and then drive to the suburbs again." Like, "Yeah. It's true. Well, let me talk to Maray and

see what, you know to share with Maray, and I'll let you know, give me a few days." And I run out and I get in the car, and I lock the car and make sure the windows are locked, nobody listen to me, and I told, "Hey, Maray! This what's going on." [laughs] Maray's like, "You say yes." Like, "No." She's like, "Why not?" "Oh, I told her to give me a few days." She's like, "What about if they find somebody?" Well. What can happen? She's like, "Why didn't you say yes?" "Well you not always can say yes at first, you know, you have to take your time to think and I wanted to share it with you." Like, "Yeah, but it would be more exciting if you say, 'Hey, I accept this.'" And it's like, "No, ah, we gonna keep talking about it." [laughs] But yes when Larry passed away, Venetia spoke to me about it, to get more involved and she would love to. And I said no at that time, I was not ready for anything like that. And it was say, I told her, "Larry's shoes honestly weren't, for me to jump in and, and people are not going to see me until ten years from now because they're still gonna be seeing Larry." So I'm not, I mean I was not interested at that time, I still was, still want to keep dancing. Even though when I retired I still wanna keep dancing. But I was already here. And you know you always have to sacrifice something, and for me that was the time to sacrifice something. And yeah I mean I'm more than grateful that I say yes. And I'm here now because I, I'm, it is a hell of a world. You have to do a lot but I love it. Now I understand, we will go back to the first piece that I did with Hedwig, Never Late. Now I understand what I was dreaming about and it's that, is like seeing my passion and, and what I love to do and see my, my see, through these dancers. No it's not for me. Nothing made me more happy, outside of my family, than just come here and see when, when they do a good class, when they do a good performance. More, more than that. See them as a human. See them as a human. I mean you can be an amazing super star, amazing dancer, but if your human side doesn't allow you to be that amazing human being and and be honest and all that, I mean it doesn't matter because that's. That's the way that you're gonna present yourself on the stage. And that will not be the right message, it's be a message. The people will be having a reflection about anyway. But knowing the world that we live in today so I can say that I'm more than happy and proud with the change that I see with the students here. All these new programs that we create, or that we're using I'm not saying that we create because maybe somebody already did before and many people have been doing it. All this international exchange that we're doing with the students. These students have been changing like day and night. They communicate. They understand. They are more human now. Before they were machine, they walk into school, they won't even say good morning or good afternoon to anybody. They won't even talk to each other. Now they talk to each other. Now they feel somebody else pain, now they communicate. I see them crying when their friends are calling from Spain and they have to go. I see them understanding other cultures. And that, that is what makes a real artist. All that different life experience. It's what's gonna get you, I mean for me it's not worth it when I see a dancer that all what can do is beautiful feet and jump and flexible and turn and then turn on their head. Whatever, you can do the most amazing physical thing. But if there is no, your soul is not there. You don't have a history to tell. Right. You don't have nothing else to tell. And these dancers are building this, is like they, they, they writing in a book full of experience now and they don't know it like they're pretty young and they just go by. But when they turn 20, in the 20 something, if they become a real professional dancers, they will really value everything because there's been a lot. There's been a lot in the last three years with them. And you know the life changing experience. I've been able to do things that I never thought about it when I was in Cuba. Having to meet the director of, Virginia Johnson, the director of Dance Theatre of Harlem, when I was in Cuba you talk about Dance Theatre of Harlem people go crazy about it. And now I know it's different but that time being in Cuba, you know, any company that you talk outside of Cuba people go crazy about it, and having the opportunity to bring her as one of our guest teacher and teach a master class for us, um. Anna Jones from, uh, ABT. I mean I can tell you Matthew...

Matthew, don't kill me, from Alvin Ailey. No, uh, Ido Tadmor, one of Israel's celebrity, dance in Batseva before Ohar, with Ohar, and now he's an amazing dancer and choreographer in Israel. Uh, you know having the access to, to talk and have these people come in and teach my students, the Ruth Page students, is amazing you know is, I can't ask for many things but one step at a time. And I think that is a huge thing to add, and an accomplishment to to a dancer, to, for a dance career you know.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:34:49] Sure.

**Victor Alexander** [01:34:49] You can do it on the business side. You know you can be an administrator and have contact with all those people, but you see one body does things in the same way.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:35:03] So I would love you to talk a little bit about-

**Victor Alexander** [01:35:06] To wrap up. No, just kidding, just kidding.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:35:07] [laughs]

**Victor Alexander** [01:35:09] She's like, "I'm getting tired over here."

**Jenai Cutcher** [01:35:13] I'm good, it's a good workout for me.

**Victor Alexander** [01:35:14] [laughs]

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:35:14] Your, the work you've done to take U.S. students and have them take class in Cuba, specifically.

**Victor Alexander** [01:35:19] Yeah.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:35:19] What has that experience been like?

**Victor Alexander** [01:35:22] Yeah, so we doing this, uh. When I start as a director, I start looking around and talk with other friends that they were running like Milwaukee Ballet, COCA Artists school in St. Louis, and many other dancing schools in the U.S. right. And everybody is in the way they all doing, they ha- they have the same format. So I was trying to do something different in the way of bringing the teacher from different places. So first I brought my best friend [name] from Spain was principal dancer in Cuba with me. But then live in Spain now. So I brought him the first time, then a friend of mine who runs school in, in Sarasota. I met him after many years in Tampa and he mentioned that he will bring Ramona de Saa, the director of the National School of Art- Ballet in Havana. And I was like, "Well, that's nice." So this lady that come here, name is Cheryl Oblander I think, and she went to Cuba at the same time that I start here as the director. She met with Alicia Alonso and she was talking about Joffrey, and Alicia Alonso asked her about the Ruth Page School of Dance because Ruth Page went to Cuba, and said like they were good friends and well she told her. And then she came back and she saw that I was the director, and then she told me about it, and I was, "Oh that's good." But then around November of 2013. Yeah. There was an article that came out in Cuba about Ruth Page. It called Famous La- Famous, uh, Woman in Havana or something like that. My father in law send it to me, and that was the first thing that's like oh, [snaps] we need to just hold onto this really hard and see if we can do something and on top of that, Dolores, I mean I have this picture of Alicia Alonso here, that Dolores she's just used to be a big fan of Alicia, so and

she'd keep talking all the time about Alicia. Said, "Okay, this is the chance here." So we started doing this collaboration with the National Ballet School of Cuba. And then we name it "Cuba y Chicago." And the idea is that the Cuban students with two teachers come here. We are, we have six students and two teachers Ignacio? Rodriguez and Ramona de Saa, the director of the school, coming here in the summer for the period of our summer intensive. Then in the midterm there we do a gala that is called, like that, Cuba and Chicago, and it's the Cuban school and us performing together and that is the foundation for us to go later to Cuba in October and then they come here in the summer, we go there in October for two weeks. We did. We do performance there as well. And then 2015 we also start bringing students from there to do our Nutcracker. So we've been doing that since 2015. And then just moving like that, three times in the year we do the exchange with them, and it has been terrific. It has been terrific. Because from there, our students here they start to really see what is out there. I mean I, I was more than happy to bring them there. So they see that those kids there have no nothing. All right. There's no Starbucks to have your frappuccino in class because "Oh, it's so hot." No, there is not, ah, what you call it Abercrombie or American Eagle. And all those brand that they use and they go crazy about it and they want to use it for class. No there's no nothing like that. You have to use what you have. You have to drink what you have and you have to eat what you have. But the passion and the desire to become somebody it's there, it's 24/7. It's there every single day because there's that need of saying something and do something and they, but there's no choice of like, "Oh I'm gonna be dancing until I'm in twelfth grade. And then I'm going to the university and I become a lawyer. And then four years later I'm tired of being a lawyer and I go back to university again because I want to be a nurse." No, there's not that choice. You're gonna be a dancer and that's it. Maybe later you decide or quit or no, but you don't have that many opportunities. And I think they got it, from the first time, and they really appreciate it. Their interest in dance changed a lot since that time. And then we have, I mean we have the opportunity to to open that window for Catherina Conley who become one of, let's keep saying one of the first or the first American student to be part of the national school since 2014 when the relation- diplomatic relation between Cuba and the U.S. open again. So we have Catherine there, she, she did one year there. I mean she got invited that's what make it big and nice. Uh, we have Catherine there. She was there for one year. She went to the competition, the international competition in Havana. And she placed second. I mean among many others, dancers from all over you know and now she's she's also the first American to be invited to be part of the professional training with the National Ballet of Cuba. So she's there now training with the company. I mean for me as, as school director is like [sighs] you know it makes you feel good, but it make me feel good and it make everybody feels good. Dolores, Birute, have seen her since she was 7, I think that she came here, grow like that and then be where she is now and see her. She come and do the Nutcracker with us, she's been doing, ah, she's been our Snow Queen for the last two years. She did recently she did the solo for Rose, too. And it was amazing. But all that is you know and it motivate, it connect each one of them to, to keep wanting what they're doing. And I think that's that's the that's the whole idea behind that is like, you touch one and that one get to the goal, and everybody else will try to do the same and then you start with that healthy competition. We do the same with Italy, it's a school in Rome, that is more based on modern dance and projects. There's a lot of different choreographers that come from from Europe and they go there and they do a residency and they do classes, they create choreographies, and they move on. So you have that constant change for teachers and choreographers. That is, it's another way to learn and try to find the balance of seeing who's really will become a classical dancer, a ballet dancer, and who's going to be more modern and contemporary. And I try to be straightforward with them and not, not fit the dream of, "Oh, you're gonna be such an amazing ballerina" when I know it's not gonna happen, that she will be more a

modern and contemporary dancer. So I'm trying to be straightforward with them and be honest. I don't, I don't want to build, like I said I don't want to build up a dancer or I don't want build a school based on lies. You know, I'd rather have this small group of students learning how to really dance and love it than not have this many just coming to me because I can take them to the YAGP for example. Now, no, that is not that's not my goal. I hate competitions. I can do it for myself. I can take challenge, but I hate be part of it. I hate being, being, having to compete. That's why I'm trying. I'm trying and I'm working and create something completely different because I'm not gonna compete with Joffrey. I'm not going to compete with Chicago Ballet or A&A or, none of those schools. Each one of those school have their value. So I'm looking, I'm looking my own value, and what I learned as a dancer and that's one of the things, that what I learned the most was when I, when I have the change of working with choreographers from outside of Cuba. Because I was able to see what was out there, you know. To feel it. So that's what I want for, for my students to be able to get more information and not just lock themselves and, "Oh what we have to do is this." And no, there is so much than you can do and not necessarily need to be through competitions. There's many other doors that we can use in this field that is not that. So, yeah it is a business. Yeah we need money to pay bills and stuff like that, but I want to build a strong base in the way of not having to go to, to the liar, oh I'm going to take you to, no I'm not promising anything. I will do whatever I have to do to make them happy, especially when they get to that level of 12th grade and they're getting out of college. I will knock on any door that I have to do for them, if I have to go with them to college and talk to people and be there for them to do the college audition if they want to pursue dance. Company director, ah, another school director because there will be a talented dancer that we maybe not be able to offer what they need anymore. You know so I'm not blind, I'm not trying to be like, "Oh I'm the the big apple in Chicago, and I can do." No, there's many other schools that probably, they will get to some level that we're not gonna be able to offer anything anymore and I'm not, I have no problem to go and knock the door of whoever it is for them to to see the dancers that I have. And being able to keep making that, that path longer for them, you know. And sit and talk to them and have them understanding that dance is not a hobby because it's not, it's something that grows in you and then you love it. And once you love it it become a drug. You know, you cannot step out of it, you can't. It's amazing. And especially if you build your life around it. Uh. I built my life around it. My son is not dancing, but his life is around dance all the time. He would see, see how many performances he's seen since he's, I don't know, one day old until now and he loves it you know. But that doesn't mean that he's not going to appreciate it. And he understand that is not a part time. He understand that it's not, he understand that there is a lot of sacrifice. We sacrifice a lot. I did sacrifice a lot. I left my family when I was 11 to move six hours away from from from them to become something. Later on, when we were 20 something we moved to the U.S. so our families they even far away from us. And then we face many new, different stages in this country. Many different things. I mean I remember there was a dancer, I forgot his name, that he looked at me and was like, "How come you don't even speak English. And then you're dancing with two companies?" I'm like, "Well, but I'm dancing." Like yeah, "But you just got here." And that was, I think that was what he meant and made me create that not confidence thing about like being an immigrant. And 'cause he coming in that position of, "Well, you just got here in this country. You may be sold out, you don't even have papers, you're illegal" or whatever he want to think you know. And that touch you in that way. Because you become sensitive at that point. But like I say you know you have to, you have to build a thick layer of skin in your body to get through, and not let those things move you away. You know, and now I'll be like, just because of that I want my dancers to understand that and not my dancers. I want- I don't know who's going to see this video forty years from now. Right. Just to understand that if you're gonna just jump into it. Just do it. Not, nothing halfway through because it's

not going to do any good for you. And it's not going to do any good for the community because as an artist you create your followers. And it's pretty sad when somebody is following you because who you are as a person and on the stage and then later you drop it and then you, you just cut it there, is like you cut a tree and then you put gas on it and then you don't let it grow anymore. No. So you have to. You have to follow. You really have to invest the time on it. Yeah. It's not work that people appreciate for the economic side, yeah it's true. But you have to put that in the balance, like I got it. We live in a country that everything is based on money, you know. You have to pay your bills, you have to pay your rent. Not getting cheap, it getting more and more expensive you know. But as those things are getting expensive, if you value yourself as a dancer and then you respect yourself as a dancer people will pay for you. You'll be able to establish and demand what you want. And people will do it because people will see that that you, a true person, a true artist, or a true teacher or a true whatever. But if you doubt it at one point people not gonna believe in you and I think that's one of the most important things, just believe in yourself and keep moving with that side of being a dancer. I really feel really bad when I see people like, like just invest a lot of time because you have to invest time to become a dancer. I love it. But it hurt your body, hurt your brain, it hurt everything, is hard. Dance is not easy, but you love it. You know, you love it, is like when you are in a relationship with somebody that makes you cry today and then tomorrow we walk out of the house and the next day bring your flowers and all that, that is how dance is. Today, tonight, the show is going to make you look so bad. But maybe next day make you feel like you're the best dancer in the world. But you have to keep those dream with you. You cannot just give it away and be like, "Ugh. That's it." You know I had a friend John Ross, he was dancing with Joffrey, a while ago we were dancing at the Lyric and he told me, "I'm not gonna dance anymore. I'm gonna go and, uh, and find a real job." I was like, "What are you talking about? A real job? What I'm doing? This is what I've been doing since I was 11, this is my real job, I'm not gonna do anything." You know? So it hurt, it hurt, it hurt me when I had to retire. I retired in 2015. And. Yeah I want to? No. I wanted to keep dancing. And. But you know they, they have priorities. I cannot think of myself anymore as just me. I have a 12 year old boy and he's growing. He's gonna need things pretty soon and. Yeah just dancing dancing dancing and not being home. It's not going to help him. It's not going to help me. And you know the, the priorities. So.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:52:25] So I think, I personally have one more question, but if you want anything after that. So if you, there are several Cubans [laughs]. There are several Cubans in Chicago, not just you, and especially modern dancers. So how do you see the the this community that's grown, how would you narrate that? And then also if you were to tell a Cuban that has never been to Chicago what dance is like here, the dance scene, how do you describe it? So I guess when you're first telling a Cuban friend, "Oh yeah, this is Chicago. This is where I live," what do you tell them?

**Victor Alexander** [01:53:08] Oh. It is different. It is different and I'm always going to talk about us. I mean I would not separate the conversation, uh, when Maray and I first came here. The dance community here in Chicago was different. You have more opportunities. There were many companies stated that they were there and that they are not around anymore. So you have less opportunities. Uh, you have to work hard. You have to work hard. Now everybody is working as a project, so it's a pick up thing, working for three months and then later not. So you have to be smart about it. But I'll tell you what I didn't know, I will tell every, every Cuban that come to Chicago and want to work as a dancer. It will take time, it will take time. But there is one thing that you have to do in order for you to succeed and allow people to see you. Honesty is important. Loyalty is important. And you cannot be arrogant. You have to be able to take your suit. We all come from Cuba with

that big suit of we were principal dancer in the national company. Yes we were, but that was in Cuba and when we toured with the company in Cuba. Here, nobody see us dancing yet. It's on paper, but people need time to see it. So you have to be able to take that suit off, hang it in the closet, let it get a lot of dust, and then prove yourself and for that you will need those things that we were talking before. You need honesty, you need to be loyal. You need to give your passion for the dance. You need to be human, more than anything because those things can play a lot hard against you because it's not about how good you are. It's about how consistent you are. Ah, me as a company director, I don't care about have the best dancer in the company if it's not gonna be consistent. So I would rather have so-so dancer that someday will look like best but is consistent and I can keep them for a long time and not just for one year. So, but more those things, and respect respect, I think respect is important. And and and value yourself more than anything. Value yourself more than anything because once you start valuing yourself as an artist, you, and understand those words, the honesty, the passion, the love and the respect and all that, people will see it and people will call you and people will always think like, "I can work with this person." And, and be a dancer when, being a dancer is hard. But when you you're an immigrant and then you need to start from zero again. It's even harder. So that, at that point it's like, uh, it's like a wolf race. It's a long distance race, it's not a short distance race. So you have to be able to keep going and things will fall in the right place. But if you just want [snaps] get things by tomorrow and you just basically sign up on immigration and say you are defecting or you come here for work or for living, it's not gonna work. It's not gonna work. And I see it, I experience that myself and my wife too, and Maray. But I know many others that have been going both ways. I know the ones that succeed because they have been keeping all that and I see the ones that failed because they want to be somewhere in [snaps] short amount of time and it has not happening because people doesn't know you. It's like that for everything in this country. It's like that for credit right. You just get new in the country, and you don't have credit history and then you're not getting anything. So it's like that. So you got to build that credibility, so people will be willing to work with you and then after that you start with their respect and then. One thing will come after the other. So.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:57:42] I know I said more but just one.

**Victor Alexander** [01:57:44] You see, I told you. [laughs]

**Jenai Cutcher** [01:57:44] [laughs]

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:57:45] So, um, typical.

**Victor Alexander** [01:57:48] No, it's okay.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:57:49] So since 2012, or 2002, last question I promise.

**Victor Alexander** [01:57:53] No, no, I'm not. I'm just looking the clock because I think somebody was calling, but it's okay.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:57:57] Since 2002, have there been a lot of Cubans that have reached out to you and have you helped them get established here?

**Victor Alexander** [01:58:04] Yes. Yeah, there has been a lot of Cubans, not just to me, reaching out to, I think same thing that we did when Maray and I got here, they were more Cuban classical dancers, right. And they tried to help us, help us in the way. Like took us to Hubbard Street, Joffrey and-

**Elizabeth Schwall** [01:58:28] Do you mind saying names, like who?

**Victor Alexander** [01:58:30] Yeah I mean there was Ernesto ? was here and Guillermo Leyva and... who else was here? [name], he came later. Uh, but then from the modern side it was just Maray and I here and then later Michel and Jessie come in. And then later Edson, and then later, uh, who was that? What's her name? She's in Miami, she came in and then she went, well I forgot her name- Jennifer. And then Alberto and Taimy, and then, well, Michel helped to, you know, once you. But there's Rodolfo and Olivia, there is Alejandro, and there is Rigoberto. So there is a big group now, Cuban dancers that we all went basically to the same school, through the same company. And yeah I will help each one of them if, if I have to. I guide them as much as I can. Like I say I mean there is always, always so much that you can do, and [pauses] you know, and life is, life is acting weird all the time and I can help you but I cannot guarantee you that you're going to have the same path that I had, and that is what I struggle with. I can help you but I cannot tell you that you're going to have the same. Or you going to be doing the same things that I did. You know. Uh, I had a life lesson. Maray and I, we came here and then we have work, we never had being without work here in United States. Work for a company, used to be called Dance Art. Teach for Chicago Public Schools. Nice salary, we use to work for the Chicago Lyric Opera, nice salary, Hedwig, Venetia, was doing guesting here, teaching in the suburbs everything. When we have this big thing in 2008, 2010, uh, there was no work. That was the time that I almost was about to stop dancing, and I had to keep feeding my family and my son had to go to school and mortgage have to be paid, and like that right. So I work part time in J.C. Penney. I never had done anything in my life that it was not dancing. I applied for that job. I don't know why I did it, maybe was thinking that I will never be called. And I got called three days later for an interview. And I applied for the most crazy thing because I read the application in ?? and I didn't know what, I didn't know anything. I was like, "Oh, I'm gonna choose this one. This sounds fine." I think I choose, uh, what's that thing, re- replenishment. So it was the worst. Because I had to be in the store at 3:00 a.m. So when the truck come in with clothes and stuff like that, there's merchandise. Somebody will move the stuff off the truck and then you have to organize everything and then I would finish at 8 a.m. and I would go to rehearsal with Hedwig. Maray would pick me up. I would fill, and then would go to rehearsal with J.C. Penney, to Hedwig, finish at Hedwig, come back home, go and teach in the suburbs and next day the same thing. But there, you know as an artist you always live in that bubble of "Oh." And then you don't have money but you want the most expensive thing, right. And there I, I learned how to live with real people and listen to all these people's real problem because as an artist, we have no problem. You know we complain about everything because we have to, because we think that we are like blah, right, but live with those people there four days a week, and listen to a real problem there. It was a life lesson and then I start to value a lot more what I had before. So when all this craziness happened in 2012 I did went back and would come one day at 3:00 a.m. I went back and the supervisor was there and I was like, "Thank you. I'm out." He was like, "What, are you not gonna work today?" I was like, "Not today. No, no." He's like, "But what happened? We love you here." It's like, "Yeah, but that's enough. That's it. I learned a lesson. I really appreciate what you guys did for me here. How you guys, you know, helped me with stuff and everything but I'm done." And you know that, because of that I helped people and I be more than happy to help and guide every single Cuban that come in for the dance community. And even if it's not a dancer, I help too because we're Cuban, right? I'm not gonna be the one that cross my arm and see you drown and not help you. No, I will jump in the water with you and I will help you to get out to the shore and then we'll swim together, you know, but I cannot guarantee you that, that you're gonna have the same path because life is crazy, and you

never know when you're gonna bump into the funny thing and you not gonna be able to move more forward, you know. So but yeah, I, and it's nice, it feels nice, it feels nice when you see other Cuban dancers come in, and now that I'm not dancing anymore, I, I mean I love to go and see Hedwig performance and CDI and see that there are Cuban dancers. And I love to, to once in a while, to have a time and they come into the building and talk to them and speak the same language and be able to understand the same jokes and all that double things that we talk once in a while. That feels great. I love it. I mean I cannot be like, "Oh." No, no I do love it, I say I'm Cuban one hundred percent. There was a lady that asked me once, "How can you teach somebody to be a Cuban?" I was like, "I cannot teach you how to be a Cuban. I cannot pretend to be a Cuban because I'm Cuban." But that being said, it doesn't mean that I need to have a Cuban flag in my house, doesn't mean that I'm gonna be listening to salsa in my car 24/7, and it doesn't mean that in my kitchen is going to be rice and beans and pork every day. No, being Cuban is you. That's it. That's all. Yeah.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:06:06] S-

**Victor Alexander** [02:06:06] One more question! [laughs]

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:06:07] No, no.

**Victor Alexander** [02:06:07] I'm just kidding, just kidding.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:06:07] I have no more questions. Do you?

**Jenai Cutcher** [02:06:08] I haven't gotten to ask any questions. So I think first of all, I would love to do another interview at some point that would concentrate on Chicago dance history because that's my job.

**Victor Alexander** [02:06:19] Okay.

**Jenai Cutcher** [02:06:20] But while I have you here, and if you have the time. The one question I always ask is, you know especially you you've had a whole bunch of different kinds of experiences as a dancer and now you get to see younger dancers from all over the world. Is there anything that's especially distinct or unique about Chicago dance? That you could talk about?

**Victor Alexander** [02:06:45] I will tell you what I love and what I really admire from, we can, we can consider it being a Chicago dance, but compare, if I compare where I come from and how the kids develop as a dancer here. I mean I guess people say I'll take my hat off because if I had to be a dancer in the way that the kids become a dancer here, being in the school at 7 a.m., right, all the way until 3:00 or 3:30. Deal with that and then come here, start taking classes 6 or 4 p.m. all the way until 9 p.m. I would never be a dancer. So in that, like I say before, in the beginning, none of that makes sense to me. But after a few years I start to respect a lot that point of view, and it's also for the professional dancers that have to, that need to have two or three or four jobs because I went through that as well. And the kids here. I mean I have kids here, especially in Ruth Page, and I see it in all the different schools, that I take them to Cuba and the Cuban teacher, not even that, the director of the Cuban school, she come here and she see my students, they were my students, and she want them to be in her school because the way that they dancing, the level that they have and all that. I mean I respect that because I know how the Cuban teachers are and not Cuban, just I mean all the countries that have a real dance academy,

a real dance school that you take dance class 24/7, you know, and they see, seeing these kids here in the U.S., how they, how the dance education is, I respect that more than anything. I will be yelling at them. I will be telling them like, "You guys are so lazy." But after I turn my back and I will be like, "Oh, man. If I were them I would be walking out quickly and not even let me talk anymore." Because spending all day, is not that you start your day with dance class, you start your day with a math class and then later they come and listen to us yelling at you because you're not stretching your legs? That's the last thing that you wanna do. So that is one of the things that I really respect a lot. The opportunity to learn a huge amount of dance discipline. It's amazing. Again comparing with Cuba, you learn, if you're gonna go into the ballet school, you learn ballet, character and ballet and character and that's it, and pas de deux, but it's still ballet. If you going to the modern school, you learn modern, ballet, composition, composition, modern, ballet. That's it. You know. Here these kids have the opportunity to learn tap, hip-hop, musical theatre, jazz, modern, ballet. So in the end they can do whatever they want if they really focus on it. Because you have Broadway out there, you get tired in the ABT just jump across the street and go and audition on Broadway. And if you did pay attention to all those classes, it will be there. You'll be able to do the musical, you'll be able, so that. I love that. That is one of the things that I really love a lot, and see how the dancers, well me as a dancer that's one of the things that I love seeing a dancer just jump from, be versatile, jump from one side to the other. Just like that, [snaps] boom. I love that because that means everything you know. So you have nine doors there, if you're able to do that, you have the nine doors there waiting for you to be like, we have job in every single of these doors. And the kids here have that. Now they appreciate it or not? As I say, in Cuba is vocational, is free. Here it become business, and it, is sad to say, we're kind of become like a afterschool program or a daycare, so they don't see it completely full as in this is what I want to do in my life. That's why I say, do they appreciate it? They don't, they might take six classes a week because mom need to work until 8 p.m. and if I take these six classes starting at seven or seven, you know, mom will have the time to finish. But I do love that part of the training. I love that and I respect, and I respect every every single kid that doing that and go to those things because I would not be able to do it. I grew up in a different season, where it's maybe ballet class was the first class that I take in the day and I'll be happy with that. [knocking on door] Not yet! Just kidding. Come in.

??? [02:12:04] I'm just gonna go get training company postcards, and when I get back, um, you have to call Deborah Butler.

**Victor Alexander** [02:12:10] [pauses] For the things that I told you? Or she's in fire again?

??? [02:12:14] Huh?

**Victor Alexander** [02:12:14] She's fire again?

??? [02:12:14] No... She, um. She's trying to move Sydney into advanced level ballet. Sydney's in intermediate.

**Victor Alexander** [02:12:25] OK I'll talk to Dolores about it.

??? [02:12:28] So.

**Victor Alexander** [02:12:29] But. Sorry guys, you can [indistinguishable].

??? [02:12:32] Sorry.

**Victor Alexander** [02:12:32] No, it's no-

??? [02:12:33] I, what I mean to say was I'm leaving for an hour, and I have things to pass off to you when I get back.

**Victor Alexander** [02:12:37] No, I will do that.

??? [02:12:37] That's what I should have said, and instead I was unspecific and you're like, "Now, I have questions." [laughs]

**Victor Alexander** [02:12:43] No because I have to I tell you and I will call her because I learned yesterday that Sydney wanted to drop three classes because they're experiencing some financial issues.

??? [02:12:53] Yeah.

**Victor Alexander** [02:12:53] And I told Katrina not to, that we will give those three classes.

??? [02:12:58] Got it, okay.

**Victor Alexander** [02:12:59] So.

??? [02:12:59] Okay, so I'll show it to you and I'll let you call her and like if that's the reason- the things about it is those is that it looks like she's, wants to only take from Birute and- no that doesn't make sense. I thought that she was getting rid of all of her classes with Dolores, but and trying to take classes with Birute, but that's not all of it.

**Victor Alexander** [02:13:22] No.

??? [02:13:22] She's still taking-

**Victor Alexander** [02:13:23] She will be taking two.

??? [02:13:24] But she's trying to advanced ballet in there.

**Victor Alexander** [02:13:27] Okay, she can add it.

??? [02:13:28] Is she advanced though?

**Victor Alexander** [02:13:31] [sighs] No, but we can, we can balance, we can balance that.

??? [02:13:38] Okay, well I'll put it all together- you're still doing stuff. This is like super intense. Is this all for Saturday?

**Victor Alexander** [02:13:45] What is that?

??? [02:13:45] Huh?

**Victor Alexander** [02:13:45] Oh, no. Don't. Shh. [whispering] Don't mention that Saturday thing. I don't want to do that interview for Saturday.

??? [02:13:53] [whispering] What is this for?

**Jenai Cutcher** [02:13:53] Two things. The Chicago Dance History Project.

??? [02:14:05] [still whispering] Oh, so cool. And what else?

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:14:06] [laughs]

**Jenai Cutcher** [02:14:06] Oh, Elizabeth's research.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:14:06] Oh, yeah.

??? [02:14:06] [still whispering] Oh, cool. Exciting.

**Victor Alexander** [02:14:06] [quietly] Don't mention the interview because in a few hours, we both are gonna be out of here. And when-

??? [02:14:09] I just found out that my office, literally like 15 minutes ago, [name] told me that my office is gonna be open all weekend?

**Victor Alexander** [02:14:18] Yeah.

??? [02:14:23] And not locked, which means I have some cleaning to do.

**Victor Alexander** [02:14:23] Some...

??? [02:14:24] You knew your office was gonna be on display. I didn't. I thought my office got to be locked.

**Victor Alexander** [02:14:28] No my office. I'd probably lock my office and swallow the key or something.

[02:14:34] [laughter]

**Victor Alexander** [02:14:34] [laughs]

??? [02:14:34] There's like 10 keys for this office.

**Victor Alexander** [02:14:37] But, uh, but yeah don't mention about that interview. People be, "Where's Victor?" "I don't know." I mean four hours from now, we both are gonna be gone and there's no time for us to do video or nothing.

??? [02:14:57] [indistinguishable]

**Victor Alexander** [02:14:57] Yeah. [laughs]

??? [02:14:57] So speaking of that I'm gonna go get the training postcards from the printer.

**Victor Alexander** [02:15:02] Good.

??? [02:15:03] So, happy filming. [door closes]

**Victor Alexander** [02:15:04] [laughs] Yeah, so. Yeah we have all these things happening. [whispering] And it was supposed to happen today. And Venetia, our executive director, she's like, because some of her dancers blah blah. It's not about the dance it's about the building. So she change it, and when she realized I'm not gonna be here for Saturday, Anne is not gonna be here. Kayla, which is the one that's been in charge of everything, is not gonna be here. So they want to interview myself talking and telling people like, "Hey, sorry I'm not here, blah blah blah." And I'm like, "It's not gonna happen." No. I'm not gonna do it.

[02:15:45] [laughter]

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:15:48] Well, I can't thank you enough for taking the time to talk to us.

**Victor Alexander** [02:15:56] No, my pleasure.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:15:56] You're such a, it's so interesting to hear you talk about your life.

**Victor Alexander** [02:16:02] Oh, is that two hours? One hour?

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:16:03] [laughs]

**Jenai Cutcher** [02:16:04] You're gonna give her a run for her money, that's for sure. Two and a half, well done.

**Victor Alexander** [02:16:07] Good lord.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:16:07] No, but I mean honestly I had a chance to meet Isidro and do an interview with him at his house-

**Victor Alexander** [02:16:15] You did?! Oh man.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:16:15] in Havan Vieja. But you know he's not. He's pretty closed.

**Victor Alexander** [02:16:19] Yeah.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:16:19] So it was really wonderful to hear you talk about him because, and you know, Victor Cuellar, it's really hard to, so I mean I feel like I got a lot more and you have so many wonderful experiences in Cuba. I'm sure in a couple of years, you'll have even more to ask Victor about Chicago.

**Victor Alexander** [02:16:37] And I feel bad. I mean, one of the things that I feel bad is like I've been going to Cuba a lot lately and I know last time we were there in 2015, that we perform with Hedwig, Isidro was there in the show.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:16:52] Awh.

**Victor Alexander** [02:16:53] I know he was there. And then we were talking. And before the show, like a day or so before the show, and he say, "One of the things that I still would love to do, if I go back to my youth again, it would be Magnet." Some of the choreography

that we were talking about. He loved it, I mean he will be in rehearsal with that piece and he will be crying, like crying. I mean it was a 20 minute piece, but it has such a huge range of images and moments to like tear you or your body apart, and then we build it in that way. The idea was a four monks getting out of the convent and escape. And then you know when you live in a place like that how many things you face when you go outside, right. That you're not exposed to. So it was that, but somehow, how it happen, I think if you talk to each one of the original cast, nobody will be able to tell exactly how we connect things. To make that story our own story, that not even the choreographer know. I'm a hundred percent sure that she saw really strong, and then we tear people's, uh, heart apart, but she doesn't even know what we dance about it. I cannot tell you what we dance about it. I mean it was those moments that when you realize you're dancing but you're crying and then you have a huge knot in your heart and here, that the only way that you can do is, is dance. I mean there was no nothing about it and then he was talking about it. And after that I've been to Cuba a lot and I have not been able to see him and I want, one of the things that I want to do is when I go with my children, organize like a reunion or a meeting or something and have him, you know, talk to, talk to, to the kids. Especially because he knows me and he knows a lot about the dance in Cuba. You know so to have them feeling a little bit more of like, this is what it is. So that's one of the things that I really would love to do. If I'm able because you know now with the new president and. Everything is messed up.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:19:29] He had just retired when I spoke to him.

**Victor Alexander** [02:19:30] Yeah.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:19:30] And he seemed kind of sad, so I think that would mean a lot to-

**Victor Alexander** [02:19:35] He's retired I think agains- how do you say against his will.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:19:39] Yeah.

**Victor Alexander** [02:19:39] Is that how you say it?

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:19:39] I think. It seemed like it.

**Victor Alexander** [02:19:41] Yeah yeah he's not, but he's not happy with the way that the company has been run. So he he told me, he's like, "I'm about to step out." And. So then you find a lot of that old generation there, so and then you don't find more information about Victor Cuellar because of that. Because a lot of the old generation are not there or they have been removed from the dance scene. So.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:20:11] When you came, like what you said the older dancers, there was that big change.

**Victor Alexander** [02:20:15] Yeah. It was. It was a huge change, it was a huge change, yeah. Then Isidro was there. I mean I got to see him a lot before but.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:20:24] That's great.

**Victor Alexander** [02:20:24] Yeah.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:20:25] Yeah. Thank you so much for your story.

**Victor Alexander** [02:20:29] No, my pleasure.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:20:29] I mean you're in the midst of this storm of things.

**Jenai Cutcher** [02:20:29] Yeah, yeah.

**Victor Alexander** [02:20:29] Oh, psh.

**Elizabeth Schwall** [02:20:29] So I really appreciate you taking the time.