

# A Dancer Goes Back To Her Past In Berlin

By NICHOLAS KULISH

BERLIN — When Dominique O. Rosales takes the stage in front of the Brandenburg Gate here on Saturday with the other members of the Ailey II dance company, it will mark the end of an unlikely round-trip journey.

Ms. Rosales, the daughter of a black Cuban father and a white East German mother, raised in the distant East Berlin suburb of Marzahn, will dance at the festival honoring the opening of the new United States Embassy on the historic Pariser Platz. She will perform before a crowd expected to reach 100,000, but most important to her will be the 40 or more friends and family members who come to support her.

The open-air festival, called Amerikafest, features her first performance in Berlin since she graduated from the State Ballet Conservatory here in 2001 and began a journey that led her to the cast of "The Lion King" in Hamburg, the Ailey school in New York and finally home again.

But it also signifies an end in another way. The performance in Berlin is probably her last with Ailey II, the prestigious junior troupe of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater — not that she is going to let the uncertainty of the future ruin her grand return.

"I'm just going to take all my dancer's perfectionist mind-set out of my head for this performance and just go and have a good time," Ms. Rosales, 25, said in an interview this week at a cafe in the Prenzlauer Berg neighborhood here, where she used to horse around on the street, dancing and listening to hip-hop with her friends.

Since its inception, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has presented itself as a sort of cultural emissary, touring all over the world. But Ms. Rosales's story is unusual: A multiracial girl who was a member of the Young Pioneers Communist youth group in East Germany, now dancing with Ailey II in her hometown.



Dominique O. Rosales

This moment might have seemed impossible to her during the critical year when she was 15. Her family had moved from Berlin to the state of North-Rhine Westphalia, leaving her at the conservatory here where she was studying. Ms. Rosales broke her ankle and could not dance for the better part of a semester. And puberty suddenly gave her a more womanly body, which seemed to foreclose the option of traditional ballet as a professional path.

Instead of ending her nascent career, she said, this difficult time made her the artist she is today. "That's when I really started falling in love with dance because I used it as a tool for getting all my anger out," Ms. Rosales said.

## Onstage with Ailey II at the Brandenburg Gate in Amerikafest.

"You dance because you have something to say."

Something else happened that year that focused her on where she was trying to go as a dancer. Walking home from school she found a flier on the ground, already bearing the creases and scuff marks of passers-by who had stepped on it. It was an advertisement for a performance by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Ms. Rosales did not get to see the performance, but she put the picture up in her school locker, where she would see it every day before she went to class for another grueling day of rehearsals.

"They had these big 'fros, and they're jumping, but with these pointed feet so they looked like they had ballet training," she recalled, sounding excited just at the memory. "They reminded me of me."

She does not like to dwell on racism but said there were difficult times growing up in a suburb of Berlin. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Marzahn was known for its neo-Nazis, and foreigners were warned not even to visit there. She said she and her siblings suffered attacks on the playground and racial slurs, with other parents standing by, doing nothing.



Dominique O. Rosales, on one leg, rehearsing at her old school.

Jan-Peter Boening for The New York Times

Friends in the United States could not believe some of the stories she told them, Ms. Rosales said, "because that's like racism from the '40s, things they hear from their grandparents." Yet she said she did not let such experiences define her or her view of the country and added that she would love to return to Berlin to dance if she found the right company.

Ms. Rosales described herself as a free-spirited child who came late to dance because she was hyperactive and never liked the tutus and other frills associated with classical ballet. "I wanted to start a ballet revolution," she said.

Her first steps as a professional led her to Hamburg, where she auditioned to be in the first German cast of "The Lion King." The audition required her to sing, so Ms. Rosales, an animated joker with bright brown eyes and a ready laugh, took along a carrot as an ersatz microphone.

She said she thought that might have made her more memorable, because out of nearly a thousand people who tried out and played everything from a giraffe to grass, she got one of the sought-after five jobs. That remark may be a bit of modesty. When Ms. Rosales returned to the conservatory on Friday, everyone seemed to remember her, and her 1995 drawing of a friend still hung in the school office.

"I saw the talent," said Tamar Ben-Ami, a modern-dance teacher at the school Ms. Rosales attended in Berlin, where Ailey II

held its rehearsal on Friday before the embassy event. Ms. Ben-Ami herself studied at the Ailey school in the 1970s. "I saw in the beginning that she is very modern and just tried to push her in this direction," Ms. Ben-Ami said.

As Ms. Rosales rehearsed, whether dancing alone in a long white skirt big enough to fill a small stage — drawing attention to the graceful movements of her arms and torso — or among a group of dancers in Alvin Ailey's signature piece, "Revelations," it was easy to see how she had come so far.

"She is a very dynamic and generous performer," said Sylvia Waters, artistic director of Ailey II, and a longtime dancer with Alvin Ailey. "She's someone with a real presence on the stage, emotionally and physically."

Though Ms. Rosales has been with Ailey since 2003, first as a student and then in the Ailey II company, she is not yet sure where she will end up now that her tenure with the junior group is over. She is waiting for a new visa but expects to return to the United States, where she is trying out for a series of companies, including the main Ailey company, looking for the right fit.

"Her chances are good," said Ms. Waters, who has directed Ailey II since its inception in 1974. "If she auditions next year, and there's a place, and fortune smiles down on us all, she'll make it."

But Ms. Rosales said she would be happy to go anywhere that challenges her artistically. "I would like to work with a new Alvin Ailey," she said, "someone who comes up from nowhere with a great vision, with a great idea."