Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean, located just about 100 miles south of Florida. Alicia Alonso was born in Havana, Cuba in 1921 and began studying ballet as a child. She was so talented that she gave her first public performance at the age of 11 in a ballet called *Sleeping Beauty*. She married a fellow ballet dancer when she was 16, and they moved to New York City together to continue their ballet training. Alonso studied at the prestigious School of American Ballet with famous ballet dancers and gave birth to a daughter when she was 17.

When she was 19, Alonso became partially blind. She went through three surgeries attempting to fix her eyes but nothing worked. Instead of giving up on her ballet
career, she learned how to dance without being able to see all of the stage and the other dancers. To compensate for her lack of sight, her dance partners had to know exactly where to stand. Different colored lights were also used to help her see if she got too close to the edge of the stage.

Two years after becoming partially blind, she played her most important role so far in her life in the ballet *Giselle*. Alonso was so successful in that role that she was asked to dance all around the world, including France, Italy, and the Soviet Union with the most famous dancers of that time. She became the first dancer from the Western Hemisphere to perform in the Soviet Union, which is now Russia.

As Alonso became more famous, she wanted to see more Cubans become ballet dancers. She returned to Cuba in 1959 to open the National Ballet of Cuba. Here, she trained her fellow Cubans to become ballet dancers, and she created her own ballets. In addition to directing the National Ballet of Cuba, Alonso kept dancing all over the world until she was in her 70s. Even at such an advanced age for a ballerina, people considered Alonso one of the best dancers in the world.
The students that Alonso taught at the National Ballet of Cuba became some of the best ballet dancers in Cuba. Many graduated and danced professionally in the United States and England.