

ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

TRUSTEES

Carole Beaulieu
Mary Lynne Bird
Steven Butler
William F. Foote
Pramila Jayapal
Peter Bird Martin
Ann Mische
Dorothy S. Patterson
Paul A. Rahe
Carol Rose
Chandler Rosenberger
John Spencer
Edmund Sutton
Dirk J. Vandewalle
Sally Wriggins

HONORARY TRUSTEES

David Elliot
David Hapgood
Pat M. Holt
Edwin S. Munger
Richard H. Nolte
Albert Ravenholt
Phillips Talbot

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

SLS-15
THE AMERICAS

Susan Sterner is a Fellow of the Institute writing and photographing the lives and status of Brazilian women.

“Breaking Paradigms”

August 15, 2000
Fortaleza, Brazil

Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

The refugees entered with slow, painful steps; bent over, crippled with exhaustion. They carried battered suitcases, tattered bundles, treasured saints and even each other. Some turned their hands upward in supplication. Others were nearly too beaten-down to continue. A child's voice sang *a capella*... “farewell my blessed place, farewell my blessed little church where I've celebrated, farewell two seasons that have brought me to my knees...”

Their journey was one that has been repeated over and over in the history of the Brazilian Northeast, where cyclical droughts, unforgiving terrain and strongman politics have starved many and sent even more in search of relief in the big cities. As the figures moved across the stage their shadows loomed like the forces behind their suffering.

From stage left entered the four principal dancers moving methodically through deep orange sand that seemed to blaze at their feet. As the music of composer Manassés de Souza surged, they pivoted with heads down and arms extended outward. Streams of white sand poured from their clenched fists — a life source, water, and earth-so-hot-it-burned — everything that rules the unforgiving *Nordestino* climate.



Silvana Marques, 13 right, embraces Carlinha Monteiro, 11, backstage following the opening night performance of “Duas Estações” at the Teatro José de Alencar in Fortaleza, Ceará.

This was the opening sequence of “Duas

Estações” (Two Seasons), the latest creation of director Dora Andrade and her brother Gilano Andrade. It is a modern ballet that strives to capture the spiritual, resilient culture of the *nordestino* people and its relationship to, and reflection of, the climate.

Indeed, there are only two seasons in this region. The bone-dry, dust-choked “summers” and the slightly less brutal, occasionally rain-sprinkled “winters.” The region claims Brazil’s most beautiful coastline, still fertile and spotted by sugarcane fields ripe with the painful history of slavery and the inspiration to the regal, African-born *maracatu* traditions present in *Carnaval*. The Northeast is also home to the *sertão*, the drought-plagued interior famed for its spiritual strength and mystic heroes. The region’s signature music, the two-step-like *forró*, lulls dancers into hip-swinging happiness against lyrics that sketch tragic tales of love and loss.

The Northeast is Brazil’s pride. The strong culture is fueled by hearty beans, cornmeal, manioc and sun-dried meats and sustained by its saints and cane liquor. But it is Brazil’s shame as well, with high infant and maternal mortality rates, rampant malnutrition and lopsided wealth distribution.

“*Duas Estações*” was my first exposure to Edisca (*Escola de Dança e Integração Social para Criança e Adolescente*, School of Dance and Social Integration for Children and Adolescents). I had arrived at the last minute and a friendly watchman had helped me slip into the rehearsal hall to view an “open practice” a week before the debut. But I found

myself not seeing the forest for the trees.

I kept losing the overall performance as my eye was drawn to the individual dancers. They were each so beautiful, radiant and strong. I kept watching their bodies and marveling at how healthy they looked. At one point I scanned their smiles — they all had their teeth! I realized I was looking at the girls (and the three boys) as poor children doing a pretty thing, and not as children performing exceptionally.

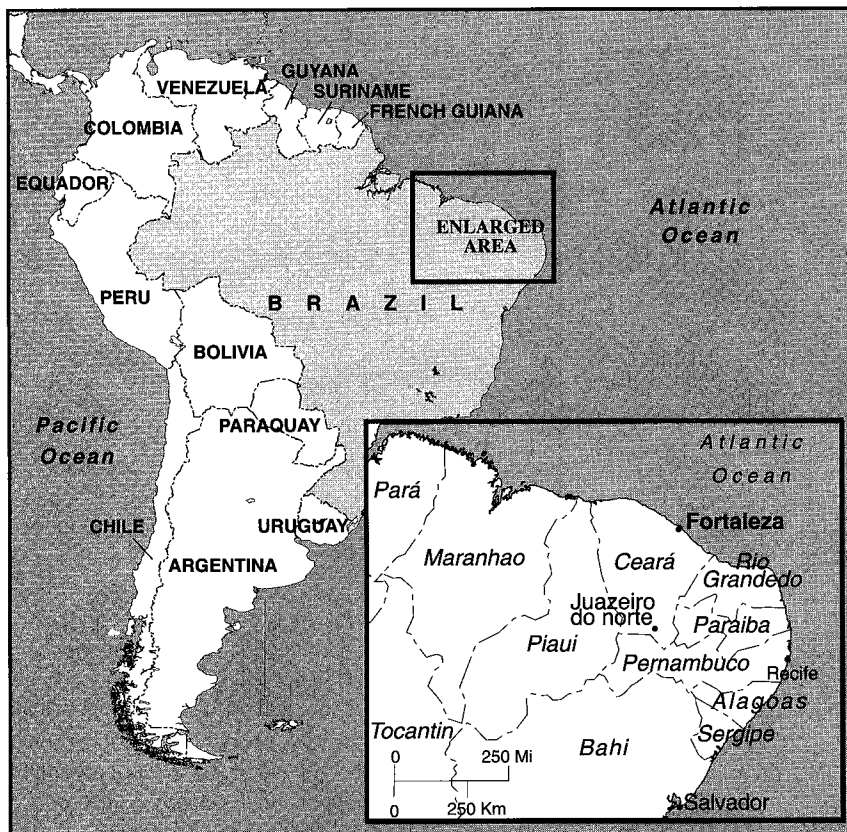
But I couldn’t help it. Until Edisca my visits to government and non-government programs for Brazilian children and adolescents had been in environments that mirrored, or perhaps were just a notch above, the poverty in which the youth lived. When the lights came up, it was as if I had been slapped out of a dream haze. I realized that after 18 months in Brazil my notions of what was adequate for a social program had been acted upon. In part I had abandoned my expectation of excellence and order and given in to the idea that anything a little better than what a needy child suffered at home, or that filled in a few gaps, was indeed “better.” And I realized I’d let myself be co-opted in into the thought-culture that always found a reason for why something wasn’t top-notch.

I returned the next afternoon. I found Dora on the rehearsal stage talking with her sister, Claudia, the school’s financial administrator and one of principle dancers. Dora was irritated by some of the feedback she had received the previous night. She was appalled by the comment that

Edisca’s new building (inaugurated in November 1999) was “too nice” and that the program was getting too upscale and seemed no longer to need funding!

Dora was indignant, “They can’t handle that I’m breaking the paradigm. That’s how it is in Brazil: if you work with people from the lower classes, why provide them with a clean environment, a healthy environment, or excellence? The paradigm here is the poor deserve poverty (*pobreza para os pobres*) — that [attitude] just shows their prejudice. Edisca is breaking the comfortable rules and now we’re in danger of losing funding because visitors think we have too much. It’s absurd. There has to be a moment when someone says, ‘Enough! This needs to change! Let’s go!’”

That week as I became more familiar with Edisca I realized the strength of Dora’s convictions. Her favorite expression when encourag-





Leillane dos Reis, 10, left, and Giza Mendes, 14, laugh together in the hallways of the Edisca facility in Fortaleza, Ceará. Within the environment of Edisca the dancers create an atmosphere of affection and caring as well as determined discipline. The girls are ever leaning on and caressing one another as well as challenging each other with new dance steps.

ing her staff was “jogar duro,” meaning “play hard” and “don’t give in.” Each day rules were being broken, expectations were being raised. And met.

Throughout their lives Dora, Gilano and Claudia have been involved in social issues due to their mother’s position as the director of an asylum. They spent Sundays cutting fingernails, washing hair, giving baths and reading stories — in short, humanizing an institutional experience.

For Dora, creating Edisca was a “good accident.” Born and raised in a middle-class Fortaleza, Ceará family, she began dancing at an early age and at 15 opened her own ballet school in the backyard of her mother’s home. Soon after, she opened dance schools in the interior of Ceará, building a reputation and spreading her passion for modern dance. Eventually, Dora returned to Fortaleza and opened two professional dance academies under her name.

Very soon after establishing the academies she started shaking up norms by taking her performances to public spaces, asylums, and even the beach — she wanted to open the experience of dance performance to a broader population. She worked this way for over 11 years, con-

tinually challenging the public with different themes. “I believe the function of the artist is to reflect her times. For me dancing “Giselle” [composed by Adolphe Charles Adam, 1841] was impossible, inconceivable. I wanted to speak about another type of woman — one who had a reality, who menstruated, who lived a real life.

“One of the first themes I worked with was the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo [mothers of victims of the Argentine dictatorship who began protesting in the disappearance and torture of their loved ones in 1977 and continue today]. Many of these women lost their lovers, brothers, husbands and sons for questions of ideology. They died because they thought differently. This happened in much of Latin America. I have friends who were tortured. Even my mother was threatened.

“And I wanted to challenge ideas of the body — the female body and womanhood. So imagine, fifteen or seventeen years ago when I did this ballet of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and I had the dancers enter with bellies at big as nine months! It was very important to me to do this, to break the accepted aesthetics.

“I was a victim of this. I have a completely “caboclo” body: large breasts, large butt. There was so much pressure to appear as the flat-chested, hipless nymphet that it equaled abuse.

“I saw the ‘pregnant’ dancers as showing the plenitude of humanity, the plenitude of femininity. For so many people the pregnant body is ugly and distorted. I think it’s beautiful and real.

“It was very important for this to happen — to show that all types can be part of art, that every dancer doesn’t need to look like a fifteen-year-old. Look at Giselle. She was heralded as the ideal but she was not real. She never menstruated, never went hungry, never gave birth, never had milk in her breasts.”

Edisca began as a way for Dora to earn State funding for her academies. She agreed to teach 50 girls twice a week as part of a program in a lower-class neighborhood. “But,” smiled Dora, “I fell in love with these girls and my life changed forever. My idea was to give two classes a week and then, ‘Tchau!’ get on with my life and my professional dancing. But these girls... I would see them trying so hard and fainting from hunger in front of me. I completely took apart my life and reconstructed it. I

closed my dance academies, and nine months later we performed our first ballet." That was nine years ago.

"I never, ever imagined that from there I would have 380 creatures on this road with me." Dora learned how to do everything as she went along, "I just followed my instincts and intuition. My idea was to do what I thought should be done. My formula is do the most simple and most obvious — but do it well. I treat the children of poor families as I would treat my own daughters."

Dora's practical experience in feeding, teaching and caring for the children of Edisca has given her perspective on how badly many health, education and social programs are administered in Brazil. "I say this with the deepest pride. I don't even want to be modest here. But my health plan is one of the best I know of. I treat these girls — dental care, gynecological care, basic health, counseling, vaccinations, everything — and we do it vertically: they can bring in their families: mothers, aunts, sisters, etc. And we do it for 7.5 *reais* [roughly U.S.\$4] a person." She looked at me frankly. The question, "Why can't others do the same?" hung in the air.

Dora abruptly crushed her cigarette in her plastic coffee cup and leaned closer to me, "Brazil is unique. I know of no other country more creative and more earnest in

perpetuating the poverty of its own children! The notion that because a child is poor, dirty, hungry — that you should make him a nice shoeshine box, or teach him to make a better straw broom — is absurd! What does a child gain from that? Does it help a child realize his potential, break [from a pattern of poverty], or learn to think for himself and feel the incentive to grow? Does it help him feel good about who he is or take the steps to get out of poverty? No. And this approach, this prejudicial attitude makes me very, very angry.

"This approach demonstrates a dehumanizing vision of children. It's a complete loss of perspective of the potential and growth of that person."

From Dora's perspective, the most important contribution Edisca makes to a child's life is an improvement in self-esteem "Their self-esteem improves. We give them a lot of well-merited respect. It is important to give them security, to make them feel super-loved and to give them their own space and time to discover their potential, their human completeness." Dora likened the moment when one of her students dances onstage to that of an Olympic athlete accepting a medal. It is an heroic journey and the girls deserve accolades for it.

The impact on Fortaleza society, including the non-



Edisca dancers Gizele Patrício, 12, left, Daniela Teotônio, 12, 2nd-left, Sasha Castro, 10, and Meriane Forte, 11, right, watch from the wings during rehearsal a few days before the debut of "Duas Estações." Edisca students are from the poorest neighborhoods of the city and receive regular meals and health care in addition to dance instruction at the school created and directed by Dora Andrade.

Leillane and Nivea dos Reis brush the dust from the halo of the theater's saint a few hours before the debut.



profit sector, has been profound. Fortaleza is the city in the Northeast known for the most obscene disparity in incomes. The rich are very rich and the poor very poor. However, Fortaleza is also one of the few municipalities I've visited that has a real sense of co-operation between entities of all types, and an effort is being made to network services instead of duplicating and wasting resources. Edisca, and its model of networking services for its students, was at the forefront of this initiative. Says Dora about the example of Edisca for Fortaleza: "Excuse my language, but I have to say I gave them a well-deserved slap in the face!"

Initially, Dora gave out hundreds of free invitations to the performances. No one came. She was lucky to fill half of the 800-seat theater. Even the theater workers scorned her girls, saying they would "break" the facility and "dirty" it.

But Edisca surprised the public, "They had to stop thinking about the 'poor little creatures' and give them respect! They saw the excellence of the girls and understood them through their capacity and quality. These girls are not 'poor little creatures.' They're precious, brilliant."

Now there are nights when she turns away 300 to 400 people. Edisca is chic. New works are awaited breathlessly by the press and then critiqued voluminously in the daily papers. On opening night the gossip magazine to the stars, "Caras" (Faces) was on hand to snap images of the "Who's-Who" in attendance for the regional society page.

Part of Edisca's agenda is to cultivate self-respect as well as good manners and hygiene. During lunch one day, back in the initial years of Edisca, Dora found a scene that broke her heart. Embarrassed by their hunger, the girls had grabbed their plates and hidden under the tables where they were sucking and eating the chicken bones they had been instructed to leave on their plates. "Every

day was a real lesson for me in their reality, in their hunger and how much they had been denied by society."

She gave them more food and then called a former student who had become the etiquette coach for the elite and asked her to give classes at Edisca. The classes were a great success. But, critics have taken her to task for "bourgeois-ing" the girls. Dora held firm and continued the etiquette training. She saw it as one of the little things that keep the poor ever-excluded.

Lice were a challenge, too. Dora and the staff would wash and comb out the girls' hair, picking out the vermin louse by louse, only for everyone to be re-infested within days. The problem was that many families had only one towel and other members would infect the towels and perpetuate the vicious cycle. So Dora found a way to provide each girl with her own towel.

To improve the general health of their skin Dora would give the girls "beauty baths" of milk, and exfoliate their skin with rubbings of sugar and lemon. All of the solutions were low-cost and based on common sense and dignity. Some children would arrive completely neglected — hungry, sick, with maggot-infested sores — but absolutely animated for dance. For Dora the child came before the dance and consequently the Edisca support system was built, brick by brick.

The balance between the students' lives at home and the dance school is delicate. Since initiating Edisca Dora has made a greater effort to include and involve the parents and keep open the channels of communication. At least three times a month there is a case of a child being physically abused. The response is counseling for the student and, if appropriate, the parents are called in to talk. "These kids aren't all angels, They can lie and sneak around or just be disobedient. They're kids," shrugged Dora. "But what is difficult is often when their parents get frustrated

or stressed. The only way many learned to deal with frustration is through a physical response." The emphasis is to work through the situation and improve communication.

In the case of sexual abuse Dora drops everything to resolve the situation, "I have no tolerance for that. The police need to be involved and the family needs to be counseled immediately. We try to get the child out of the situation, at least temporarily."

Edisca also works with the girls, who enroll between the ages of six and 12 and stay into their early 20's, on issues of sexuality and their bodies. Passing through all of the beautiful and hard phases of adolescence can be hard enough in a secure home environment. Through the program "Nossa Saude" (Our Health), the students and staff work to keep an open, frank and informed dialogue going about sex and sexuality.

Entrance into Edisca is by audition. The families from which the students come are of the under-employed and day laborers — maids, fishermen, bricklayers, etc. These are "at-risk" kids. Even without the elements of drugs and prostitution, they're in danger of living with violence and poverty as the defining characteristics of childhood. Parents know this. A spot in the ballet school has become so coveted that community leaders have been known to rent buses to cart neighborhood children to the audition. Acceptance is seen not just as prestigious for the individual family, but for the community in general.

The applicants must pass tests for flexibility, musicality, coordination and discipline. They must be currently

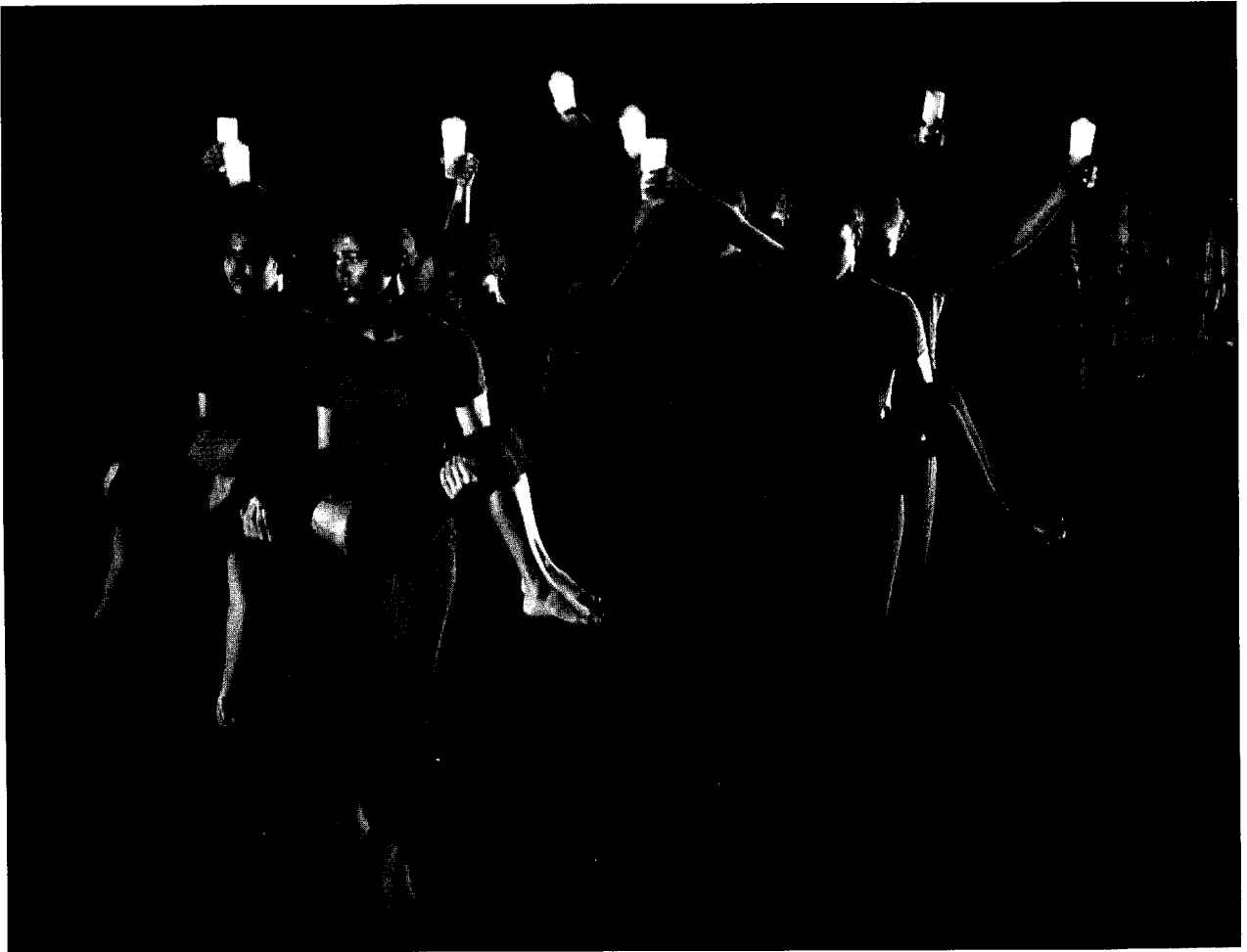
enrolled in a school and maintain good grades. And the family must reside in one of the neighborhoods served by Edisca and earn below a certain low level of income. Those that meet the criteria enter the school on a provisional basis while the family is interviewed, school records are confirmed and the child is observed to see if he or she will adapt to the rules of the program. (Families have been known to fake residences in poorer neighborhoods so that their daughters might qualify for Edisca.) Once in the school there are further auditions and periods of observation to determine which students will be part of the 42-member dance troupe, the star attraction of the school.

Each child that is accepted earns a stipend. The younger girls earn 75 *reais* per month and are paid once every three months. The older girls earn 150 *reais* per month and are paid monthly. The payment scheme here is masterly. By paying the little ones once every three months Edisca guarantees that the children are not being "used" by the family as the sole source of income. But the teens receive their money in monthly payments at just the age when they are expected to have a job and some financial independence.

Over the course of a week I got to know the 39 girls and three boys in the performance ballet. All regular classes had been canceled and only the 42 dancers who would perform were present every day. The unfortunate side of this was that I did not get to see the school in real action. Walking through the breezy hallways, however, I looked at the work of the art classes, and read the bulletin boards. Records were posted about



Elivania Lima, 14, left, and Giza Mendes, 14, rest together after running me through the forro rhythms and practicing their parts at the home of Carlinha Monteiro in the Praia do Futuro neighborhood of Ceara Brazil.



In a scene addressing high infant mortality rates in the Northeast the older dancers carry the smaller ones.

everything, from how many girls were reading which books, to the schedule of “worming” (mandatory for the entire school) and fluoride applications. I had never been in a program that held itself so accountable on every point.

The students warmed to me quickly. I found myself willingly co-opted into their lives: braiding hair, checking homework, and playing silly word games and “pedrinhas.” It seemed as though, minute by minute, I was being swallowed deeper into their emotional world. In no time I was “theirs” — constantly caressed, questioned, hugged. They were a high-energy, affectionate group clamoring for attention and affirmation. It was fascinating to watch them switch back and forth from silly kids to disciplined dancers. I think they knew they were irresistible, too.

A few days after the open rehearsal it became apparent that they were still uncertain about “*Duas Estações*.” Many had never participated in the premiere

of a new Edisca ballet. They were more comfortable dancing the proven “*Jangurussu*” or “*Koi-Guera*,” Dora’s much acclaimed ballets addressing child labor in urban dumps, and the extinction of native cultures, respectively. I found myself unexpectedly surrounded by 12 of the youngest



Silvana Marques, left, and Giza Mendes pause for a portrait before going on stage opening night.



(above) Carlinha Monteiro hugs her mother, Conceição, as she leaves for the theater on the day of the opening of the ballet. (left) Carlinha plays with her cat, Frajola, during the morning in her home in the Praia do Futuro neighborhood of Fortaleza before jumping on a city bus and heading to the Teatro José de Alencar to perform. Carlinha has been dancing with Edisca for three years. In addition to dance training she gets free health care, hot meals and scholastic tutoring as well as a monthly stipend of \$40.

girls. "Tia Susie, did you like the dance?"

"Were we good?"

"Will the audience like us?"

"What was the best part?"

"Suuu-zhaan!" as they say my name, "Why didn't they clap?"

"What was wrong with what we did?"

I assured them that on opening night they would make the audience both cheer and cry. They purred and

leaned up against me a little more before being called to the rehearsal stage.

At the end of the week I tossed out the idea that I would like to visit someone at home over the weekend. After quite heated conferring amongst themselves, it was decided I was capable of finding my way to *Praia do Futuro*. I arranged to show up at an elementary school near the house of Carlinha on Sunday morning.

Praia do Futuro is a lower-working-class neighborhood gradually becoming integrated into the city. Parts are well planned and paved with basic urban services, including nice (though overcrowded) schools. Other sections are still dominated by flimsy

shacks and sewage-plagued dirt roads.

Carlinha and Giza led us a few blocks up a short street that looked like it climbed the hills above the beach. We cut through a short alley opening into a sunny courtyard of laundry washing and cooking areas for three or four houses. Carlinha's front door opened off the courtyard. We stepped inside to meet Conceição and Carlinhos, Carlinha's mother and little brother. Her father, Carlos, was a few miles down the beach at a restaurant where he worked at a waiter.

Within minutes the house filled with Edisca dancers anxious to meet my husband, Tyrone. Carlinha put on the music to "*Duas Estações*" to teach me the *forró* sequence and test my general *gringa* coordination and rhythm. We were soon all sweaty and laughing.

To take a break from the dancing, we climbed the hill paralleling the Petrobras natural gas tanks and overlooking the stunning beaches to visit with Giza's mother.

She was very emotional about Edisca, "Sometimes Giza says to me, 'Mom, I don't want to go to Edisca today, I'm tired,' because it is a lot for her."

"She goes to school in the morning, runs home to eat lunch then grabs a bus to Edisca. It's an hour each way. But I say to her, 'Daughter, you have to go. All of this is being done for you.' At Edisca she's getting things that I could never dream of giving her. Edisca is about my dreams, too. She can dance, study and be healthy. I couldn't give her that — not me alone."

Out came the photo albums! Page by page we were shown Giza's dance history and her mother's work on the *bairro's* public-health team. Their two paths seemed to cross on big health-awareness days when Giza dressed up as a nurse, a mosquito or other plague and danced in the streets to raise awareness. Giza glowed. Her mother glowed.

The girls wanted to show us the beach so we hiked



(left) *Conceição twists Carlinha's hair. "It's been so much work for them. And, I worry because they come home so late at night," says Conceição, "But, I'm very excited to see her dance. She loves it. It means a lot to her. To all of us."* (below) *Carlina Monteiro, 11, left, and Giza Mendes, 14, nap against each other during the hour-long bus ride from their neighborhood on the outskirts of the city to the downtown theater where they perform in "Duas Estações" (Two Seasons) a ballet by Edisca (School for Dance and Socialization of Children and Adolescents) addressing the lives of the Brazilian Northeast, the country's poorest region.*



back down the hill, grabbing ice creams along the way. I felt like the Pied Piper; as we walked, more girls joined us. Each child was introduced to us with a bit of ceremony and would then fall into the giggling bunch as we moved along the beach.

Carlinha announced that Conceição had prepared lunch. Tyrone and I have learned that when a meal is prepared for us, particularly in a modest home, refusal is not an option. Putting food on the table is one of the most generous and caring gestures of hospitality in the Northeast, as in other places around the world. When a poor Brazilian is preparing food for a "well-off" foreigner the symbolism is even more loaded. And so we sat and ate a plate full of lasagna (an elaborate and expensive dish in this culture) as the rest of the household watched. That obligation graciously out of the way, I turned my attention back to Carlinha, who had crawled into her mother's lap.

Conceição was more nervous about opening night than Carlinha. "It's been so much work for them. And, I worry because they come home so late at night. But, I'm very excited to see her dance. She loves it," she said, twisting her fingers in Carlinha's hair. "It means a lot to her. To all of us."

The next morning I woke early and went to visit the dos Reis family up in the hills above *Praia do Futuro* in the neighborhood of *Mirantes*. All four of the dos Reis daughters are Edisca dancers. Liliane, 16, and Viviane, 17, have grown up in Edisca. They were some of Dora's first students and had, in turn, coached Leillane, 10, and Nivea, 12, to help them pass the rigorous auditions.

Walking into the house, I could see that the home revolved around the girls and their obsession with dance. The furniture was arranged for maximum dance space. Even their mother involved herself by volunteering at the school and selling t-shirts on performance nights.

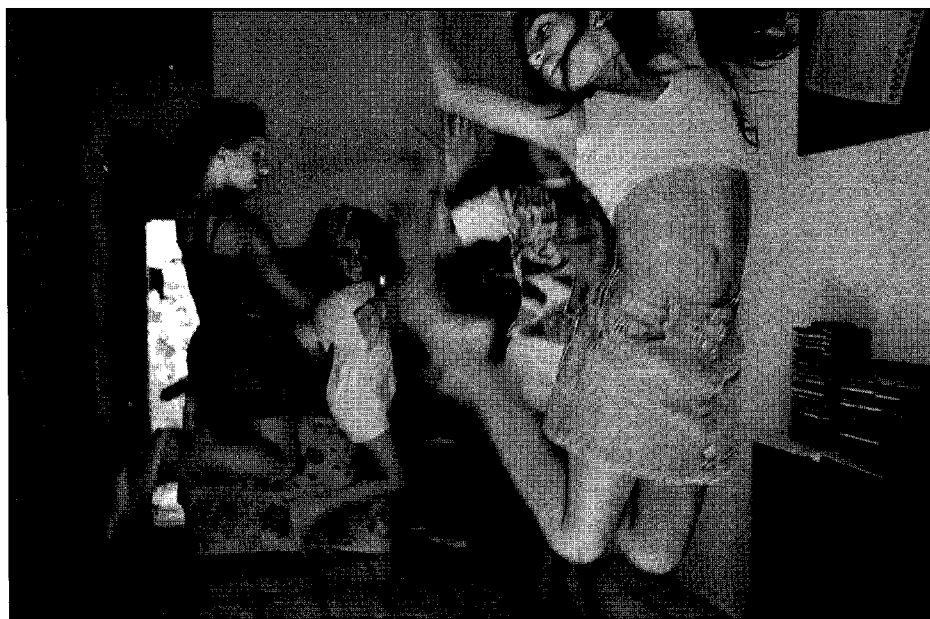
Though the girls' stipends supplemented their parents' incomes, the boost was more in a sense of family pride (the two are, of course, inextricably linked). The girls had "made the cut" and were making a difference for themselves. Liliane and Viviane use their stipends to attend a private high school outside of the *bairro*. Such an opportunity offers the possibility of passing the public university's entrance exam, a feat rarely accomplished by a student of a public school. Edisca had changed their horizons and how they thought about the future.

I thought of Verônica, one of the principal dancers, and at 21 already a veteran teacher of six years and a mother of an eight-month-old girl. She was the first Edisca student to be invited to be a professor. Edisca had opened the world to her. She was also one of Dora's first students, "I was twelve and already giving up on school. I had to leave because our family needed the money. Dancing was a dream of mine, but it was out of reach. It was too expensive. My life was already made and that was it. Then Tia Dora changed everything.

"I've had a lot of experiences with Edisca. I've traveled and taught. But I want to try something else; maybe get a degree in communications. I want to study everything. I'd like dance to be something I do for myself, not to earn money," she commented as she sorted through costumes. Without Edisca would she have had the luxury of angst over what to do with her life, or how to keep her art pure?

After a few minutes Verônica wrinkled her brow and continued, "It would be hard to leave [Edisca]. I like working with the girls. They're very strong. Everyday they arrive here with their problems but transform themselves through dance. Or you think they do...then you grasp their realities..."

Leillane pulled my attention back to her reality. Not to be outdone by the girls in *Praia do Futuro*, she and Nivea



Edisca dancers Irlane Nogueira 11, left, Leillane dos Reis, 10 2nd-left, Nivea dos Reis, 12, 2nd right, and Eugênia Nascimento, 11, right dance their parts in the dos Reis home in the Mirantes neighborhood of Fortaleza.



Carlinha Monteiro, left, and Leillane dos Reis are center stage during the upbeat forró scene in "Duas Estações." Their energy and excellence brought down the house.

wanted to show me the highlights of their neighborhood. Two others, Meriane and Eugênia, joined us as we climbed to the top of the hill to see the best view of the city. I looked around and thought the neighborhood didn't look too bad. The girls told me the view drew lots of brave tourists to the bars at night. A few minutes later, as we visited with the girls' grandmother, I learned the neighborhood was controlled by gangs. Grandma warned that the entire neighborhood knew who I was and the next time I visited it wouldn't be as safe.

I took this in as I watched the girls scale *castanhola* trees to knock down the bitter fruits. The trees were on a little knoll that allowed a spectacular view of the ocean. It seemed so idyllic in the middle of the day that it was hard to imagine the dealers or prostitutes taking over at night. I had even heard the city was trying to figure out a way to evict the residents and build luxury high-rises and a hotel complex.

On the way home Eugênia threw stones into a prickly tree to knock down little nut pods they called "*mata fome*" (kill hunger). I asked why the nut had that name? "Because, *Tia*, you can eat this when there's nothing to eat and your stomach feels full," she said, offering me an-

other lesson in the deception of first impressions.

Tuesday morning I returned to Carlinha's. Giza was there waiting for her friend to wake up and get ready. Dress rehearsal had lasted until 11 p.m. the night before. At the last minute, Carlinha dragged herself out of bed, took a quick shower and stood at the table eating bananas mashed with powdered milk and chocolate as her mother tugged her hair into a braid.

The girls could barely keep their eyes open for the 40-minute bus ride. We arrived at the Teatro José Alencar just as other bleary-eyed dancers were beginning trickle in. The buzz began a few hours before the first curtain call. Everyone's hair was pulled back into a single braid coated in mud that dried like sun-baked earth. Their eyes were painted in dark outlines with red highlights. Leillane sprinkled glitter over everyone. They flitted about the dressing room like caged birds.

I took a seat in the balcony just off stage right and set myself up to photograph the event. I looked around the audience and spotted Conceição, Carlos and Carlinhos on the other side of the theater. Conceição looked worried but waved frantically and gave the

thumbs-up sign when I caught her eye.

When the curtain went up and the somber migration scene began, I was holding my breath. The principals entered and were electric in the control and energy they held back. I watched the faces of all of the dancers, Giza, Carlinha, Leillane, Nivea, Yohanna, Jaime, Sasha, Eugênia, Cibele, Daniele, Adrielli, Silvana... Then came one of my favorites scenes: the harvest, followed by the marketplace and the *farró* dance. They entered with baskets and colorful cloths, calling out the raucous chants of vendors "*abacaxi! macaxeira!...*" then dashed off the stage and re-entered from stage left with brilliant smiles, shaking their hips to the bass-heavy *farró* music. They were brilliant! The crowd went berserk cheering and dancing with them. Goosebumps swept over me and I started to cry. They were so beautiful, so powerful. I had to put down my cameras and yell with the crowd. They had the audience twisted around their talented little legs and ankles.

It was an unmitigated success for Dora and her creative team and their interpretation of *nordestino* culture, as well as for the girls. Backstage they were crying, euphoric and exhausted.

Though I think I could have stayed around Edisca for a long time and never have tired of their company, it was time to move on to another place and experience. On the last night we were in town, Tyrone and I watched the performance from backstage. I took up an out-of-the-way spot in the wings and awaited the start.

Just before the music began I felt my legs clutched tightly by thin arms. I looked down at little Jaime. He was one of my favorites, a sweet, clever, bright-eyed boy with an impish sense of humor. He had wrapped himself around my legs and was sobbing. I bent down and held him until he calmed enough to tell me what was

wrong, "Don't leave us, Tia!" he said between hiccup-sobs. My heart broke.

A small group of girls had gathered. They were all crying. I really didn't want to be the center of their attention at that moment, "Hey! This isn't how I want to see you on my last night! I want to see you shine again so I can take away beautiful memories and be really proud! Come on! I'm dying to dance *farró* backstage!" I started dancing with Jaime still clinging to my thighs. Some faces brightened, but Jaime wouldn't let go. From a few yards away Giza glared at me as if I had ruined her life.

The hard moment was broken only by the professionalism of the kids. On cue they took their places in the wings and danced beautifully. As he danced, little Jaime watched my eyes to see if he was making me happy — and he was.

The next morning Tyrone and I sat waiting for a taxi. I saw them straggling down the street: Giza, Nivea, Leillane, Carlinha, and Irlane. They came with hands filled with goodbye letters and drawings. Giza handed me a homemade envelope with one of the photos from her mother's albums tucked inside. They wanted to know desperately that I would not forget them, that they were important and good.

I was sad to leave our little friends. But I felt hopeful. I had spent a week with a great group of youngsters and a team of dedicated professionals — none of whom bought into "*pobreza para os pobres*," none of whom expected less of a poor child, and none of whom compromised on their dreams and goals.

Até a proxima,



Author: Sterner, Susan L.
Title: ICWA Letters -
The Americas
ISSN: 1083-4303
Imprint: Institute of Current World
Affairs, Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: East Asia; South Asia;
Mideast/North Africa;
Europe/Russia;
Sub-Saharan Africa

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4303) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548
Fax: (603) 643-9599

E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Assistant: Gary L. Hansen
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

©2000 Institute of Current World Affairs, The Crane-Rogers Foundation. The information contained in this publication may not be reproduced without the writer's permission.

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.