

# Ginger Danto

## *BOMBA*



DRAWINGS © Sarah Petruziello

I first encountered Bomba in Puerto Rico, where it is indigenous to the scattered coastal cities to the north, from the time of the slave trade, and the immersion of a strong African presence on the island. Bomba is a highly agitated, rhythmic dance to a variegated drumbeat, and, in a reversal of much dance tradition, it is the dancer whose moves direct the rhythm, rather than the music informing the dance. Ultimately Bomba is like a very heated, albeit courteous conversation, that begins and ends with a mutual salutation between dancer and drummer, but in

between leaves room for much repartee. When done well it is spellbinding. When done by a novice unfamiliar with the classic steps and stances, it is merely like watching someone have fun, which in Puerto Rico is a viable, even encouraged, form of entertainment. For all its formative discipline, Bomba is also just a good time.

I had been staying in the town of Aguada, the smaller neighbor to the more sizeable city of Aguadilla (which claims one of the islands' busier airports), when I was first invited to a Bomba evening or *Bombazo*. It was on the occasion of a benefit for a local animal welfare group, where the money raised from a catered dinner (*Bombazo* are often held in venues serving food and drink,) went not to the musicians but to the cause. Preparations began late in the day, and after the program – a dog parade, a buffet of *platos typicos*, - the show got underway.

Another key component to Bomba events is the singer, or group of singers, which functions somewhat like a chorus, offering a sometimes lively, sometimes plaintive-toned narrative, that lends the performance an according mood. The essence of these songs is their refrain, which, repeated and repeated, underscores the basic simplicity of the dance, which is comprised of but a handful of steps. It is up to the dancer – in this case a soloist - to provide his or her own embellishments. Finally there is the costume, which, for women, consists mainly of a ruffled, petticoat- style skirt, made of white or brightly colored cotton or *madras*. In the course of the dance, the garment becomes a kind of prop, not unlike the fan unfurled and snapped in flamenco. For example, a Bomba dancer will gather the hem of her skirt, swaying it to and fro to emphasize or announce her movements to the musicians. .... At the height of an especially frenetic sequence called a *piquete*, she may rustle the material furiously in front of her, arching her body back, as if to say to the drummer, 'I've really had enough of you' in impassioned Bomba idiom. When she returns to an erect posture and lowers her skirt, she is once again all reserve and grace, and the audience applauds the lively rendition of an emotional journey. This relationship with the public recalls another popular Latin spectacle – the bullfight - where the dialogue is not only between the bull and the torero, but the duo in the ring and the crowd in the bleachers. Bomba and bullfighting find their commonality in both being rousing spectator sports, with an often intent and exuberant audience.

A singer at the *Bombazo* I attended was a woman named Sandra, who worked at the facility where I was staying, where she was called on to give impromptu concerts for group celebrations. At that time Sandra would explain