

Content Description:

Overview: “Puerto Rico’s Bomba, A Dance of The African Diaspora” is a six-and-a-half-minute film featuring Afro-Puerto Rican sisters Mar and Maria Cruz. Narrated primarily in Spanish voice-overs by the sisters, with English subtitles, this film explores Bomba dance by traveling to San Juan, Santurce, and Loíza—three cities where Bomba’s historical significance is conveyed through a combination of video vignettes and fast cuts between images. The film seamlessly transitions from one area to the next with identifying text and camerawork that quickly establishes a sense of place through montage: a cockeyed street sign; colorful, animal-filled murals; street food close-ups. Abundantly interspersed throughout the film are dynamic dancers in full, ruffled skirts; smiling, twirling children; keenly focused musicians; and close-ups of open hands slapping drumhead edges. The film allows one to sense the variety of bomba’s rhythms and moods: slow and fast, snappy and sultry, exuberant and joyful. Personal descriptions are worded to reflect how each dancer identifies.

An Afro-Puerto Rican woman, Maria Cruz, introduces herself in English, dancing from a San Juan cityscape rooftop. She wears a silky white dress with a billowing skirt, and holds its hem as she swirls about. Her sister, Mar, wearing a white hair turban and similar flowing dress, dances on the street against a hummingbird mural backdrop.

The sisters stand side by side smiling as they introduce the episode as “bomba.” Then, switching to Spanish dialogue, Mar explains, “In Bomba, you make the rhythm, and then everything else follows you.” A montage of different people dancing follows, and segues to Mar dancing on a rooftop with the Puerto Rican flag waving in the background.

The screen divides into a horizontal triptych for the video series’ title sequence—on top is a street level view of a dancer’s leg and sneaker spinning and rotating across the frame; in the middle, a queer black male vogue dancer flips his long braids as he swiftly waves his arms and the words “If Cities Could Dance” appear over his image; and on the bottom, three women dancers of color stand in line and arch back, cradling one another. The words, “our history, our culture, our moves” appears over a montage of quick cut dancers from across the country, including a jookin’ dancer, a Native American (Seneca and Muscogee Creek) hoop dancer in eagle formation; two Chicago foot workers dancing in sync; and a trio of hip-hop dancers performing group choreography in front of a street mural with graffiti art. The sequence culminates with queer cis woman vogue dancer looking into the camera, waving her arms and pointing her finger toward the viewer.

The words “San Juan: Bomba” appear on screen. Speaking in Spanish, Maria sets up the three areas at the heart of bomba—San Juan, Santurce and Loíza—as she dances with flamboyance and in joyful, exuberant bomba style. There is a Puerto Rican flag superimposed over a map of the northern part of the island, with highlighted regions pin-pointed.

Mar describes bomba as liberating. “You do what you feel at that moment, whatever feels natural.” Mar and Maria dance on a picturesque beach with palm trees swaying and are accompanied by a group of five Afro-Puerto Rican musicians wearing crimson jersey T-shirts. Three sit while playing large cylindrical drums held between their knees; one stands with maracas, and another plays a *cuá*, using two wooden mallets to beat on a large wooden tube that sits on a stand.

Mar, dressed in a white rayon dress with ruffled skirt, dances, and says, “Bomba helped me love myself, respect and value myself beyond what I could imagine.” She takes small, powerful steps backward in the sand, slapping at her chest in rhythm to the drumbeat. Mar wades into the ocean water and lets it pool around her ankles, as she shares how happy she feels to honor her African ancestors who brought this dance to Puerto Rico. She scoops up some water and takes a step back as the surf rolls in.

“That was their only method of self-expression,” Maria shares in voice-over while walking alongside her sister on the shore. Their backs are to the camera, their gauzy white dresses flutter in the breeze.

The scene changes to a brightly colored embarcadero: a wooden balustrade painted Kelly green; a palm tree with its trunk painted in three broad bands of yellow, tomato red and green; a yellow storefront. An iguana is perched on a tree branch. Inside a community center, dancers dressed in vivid clothing (yellow, orange and green cotton skirts) twirl.

Maricruz Rivera Clemente, community leader of the organization *Corporación Piñones Se Integra*, is introduced. The broadly smiling, brown-skinned woman with twinkling eyes looks into the camera, standing alongside a curly haired young girl. She explains that bomba “was an instrument, a space for rebellion. It was anti-systemic, anti-racist, anti-all that oppression that the slave system created and perpetuated.” She says, “And today, music remains a space for freedom and political transformation.” As she speaks, groups of women and children dance.

Mar adds, “When my mom dressed me in bomba attire, I felt like myself, I felt so beautiful, I felt like ‘Wow!’” Quick cuts of close-ups of energetic dancers and smiling people segue to Mar dancing on a cobbled street in Old San Juan with colorfully painted buildings on either side.

She dances in a wide stance with hands on her hips as she says, “This is something with which I can identify, this is me, this is part of me.” She pivots to a perpendicular position, turns her head, and leading with her elbow, dances directly toward the camera with focused expression. She flips her ruffled dress edge side to side, then smiles.

A street montage of Santurce captures people strolling, a statuary of a hunkered Indigenous man holding a flower bouquet, a smiling man holding an iguana wearing a straw hat, “Gringo go home” is scrawled on a boarded-up storefront.

Mar explains Santurce in San Juan became the first place in Puerto Rico where formerly enslaved people came. Nearby Loíza became the town with the largest concentration of Black people. The camera pans along murals and street food, where kebabs cook on a grill.

The text “Parque Histórica Cueva Maria de la Puerto Rico” appears on screen.

Mar and Maria approach musicians playing in a grassy area surrounded by rocky outcrops. The perspective is from inside the cave, looking out at the musicians and dancers, as Mar says, “This cave is an ancient place, but was also known as a shelter for people escaping slavery.” The sisters dance in unison, holding their dress hems and swishing their dresses side to side at head height, the edges billowing out in rippling half circles, as Maria says, “I dance by myself too, but it’s so much more fun when I dance with my sister. What joy it is for both of us to be dancing together.” The sisters continue to dance together, but break out in independent moves. Maria dances side to side with jutting hips, and Mar is slightly hunched, undulating front to back, her dress held out wide at shoulder level.

As Mar dances she explains the indigenous Taíno influence on the dance, and how the maraca and the cuá keep a constant rhythm. “The primo drum guides and improvises. It’s a conversation between the dancer and the drummer.” Holding her hem, she brings her hands together chest high and rapidly flaps them together; she then takes a big bent-knee step to the side and flips one side of her dress back and forth over one shoulder toward the musicians.

Family photos fill a wall as Jesús Cepeda says, “The Cepeda family is one of many families who have made sure to keep bomba alive. The first teachers we had were Don Rafael and Doña Caridad. They showed us how it all worked.”

Text appears on screen: “Jesús Cepeda, Master drummer, Don Rafael Caridad School of Bomba and Plena.”

Men in an open-air room groove to the beat as Jesús drums. As Jesús says, “Papi always said that when Puerto Rico finally reaches a point when it recognizes the value of its folklore, it will fight to defend its honor.” There is black-and-white footage of his father, Don Rafael Cepeda, and his grandmother, Doña Caridad, dancing bomba in a somewhat formal style.

Jesús says, “He fought to give recognition to this music. It had been marginalized and forgotten simply because it was Black music. Black music, you know, comes from the people.” We see footage from the documentary “Bomba; Dancing the Drum,” depicting a group of young people at the Cepeda family home in the late 1990s, dancing bomba at a house party.

As Mar says, “Bomba used to only be played and danced to while with the family,” the camera pans around the living room of a multigenerational household, where Maria shakes a maraca, others play various percussive instruments, and Mar in a rocker nurses her baby. Then, the

tempo changes, and the camera moves from inside to outside. It's a sunny day; there's close-up of brass instruments and a group of Indigenous people and tourists dancing in line formations.

As Maria says, "Now it has made a huge comeback. People dance to it on the beach, on stage, at someone's home, anywhere," and we see Maria, smiling as the lead dancer in a vivid green satiny dress, as she encourages the pedestrian dancers following along. This segues into a montage of various locales and dancers: a street fair, on a platform, children dancing in a circle indoors, a dancing girl using her tangerine skirt as a veil, close-ups of shimmying shoulders and hands on hips with bent arms flapping.

Maria, in a plum-colored cotton tee shirt and faded jeans, dances as she says, "I feel as if the drums are beckoning me, asking me to get on the dance floor. It's the ancestors nearby, sending you that vibe." She's in a pub-like setting—a *chinchorro*—with musicians (a band called Tendencias) in casual clothing playing behind her. Mar, in her traditional white dress and hair turban, dances next to her, and says, "If a little girl watches me dancing, I can only hope to inspire her to search for her roots." Mar continues dancing in close proximity to the musicians. One drummer in particular focuses on her as they play back and forth with syncopated rhythms.

Credits appear on screen. Featured musicians: Los Parranderos de Loíza, Majestad Negra, Tendencias, Jesus, Mario and José Cepeda; Director, Cinematographer: Armando Aparicio; Producer, Editor: Charlotte Buchen Khadra; Editor: Rachel Boyoung Kim; Associate Producer: Masha Pershay; Field Producer: Janizabeth Sanchez; Additional Camera: Tito Román Rivera; Translation: Andréa Valencia, Luis López; Production Assistant: Chinwe Oniah; Music: Don Rafael Cepeda Atilés, APM Music; Murals: Jorge Isaac Puerta Strada, "Aspirante" by Alejandro Rodriguez, "Resiliencia" by Danaé Brissonnet; Archival Materials: "Bomba: Dancing the Drum" by Ashley James/Searchlight Films, Berkeley CA; Special Thanks: Dr. Marta Moreno Vega, The Cepeda Family, Corporación Piñones Se Integra (COPI); Senior Producer: Kelly Whalen; Executive Producer: David Markus. Support of KQED Arts is provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Support is also provided by the members of KQED. A production of KQED Arts © 2020 KQED.

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