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The breakdancer who became a prince

Carlos Acosta is the one-time delinquent Cuban street kid whose rise to ballet stardom has stunned the world – and there are plenty more where he came from. He talks to Ismene Brown

Ismene Brown

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Under the swaying shade of pines lining a hot Havana street, six guys are passing time.

Five are clapping rhythmically, egging on the sixth, who is spinning exuberantly upside-down on the tarmac. Tomorrow, five of these friends will still be there, passing time away on the street, amiable and envious; the one on his head will be flying first-class back to London, or New York, or Moscow, because he is Carlos Acosta, one of the great classical ballet dancers of our era.

Acosta is almost as famous for his ghetto-breaking background – far outclassing the feeble cinema fable of Billy Elliott – as for his artistry. Cuba is rapidly becoming renowned as the maverick country of poor boys and ballet princes, so prodigal is the spread of world-class classical ballet dancers from its airport. And the paragon of Cuba's mould-breaking defiance is 30-year-old Acosta.

The son of a truck-driver with 11 children, delinquent and disaffected after his mother became seriously ill and his father went to jail, the boy was ordered to ballet school to clean up his act. By 16, he was crowned the finest boy ballet-dancer in the world at the Prix de Lausanne, the blue riband of student dance competitions.

By 18 he had left Cuba for an international career – London's English National Ballet being an early stop – and by 23 was being discussed in the same awed whispers as those other escapees from privation, Nureyev and Baryshnikov. The backstory is so extraordinary that of course it's tempting to wonder whether Acosta really is that good, or whether the artistic rating gets a helping hand.

Well, as any experienced London ballet-goer will confirm, after watching Acosta's dazzling performances at the Royal Ballet over the past four years, there is no doubt. As an athlete, as a noble partner, and as an increasingly thoughtful, expressive artist, he has a reputation that needs no burnishing. But, yes, it is all the more astounding that this prince of ballet princes came from delinquent poverty.

"If you are someone from one environment trying to pursue a different world, you are always going to find obstacles in your way. But those obstacles aren't necessarily the enemy," Acosta told me proudly last week in his Royal Opera House dressing room. "You have choices. You could be your same kind of man forever, not learn anything else, be secure in what you have – or you could go and fight those obstacles, learn, and at the end have your own language and other languages, so it makes you a rounder and better man. I could have just stayed there in Los Pinos and hung around with the same crowd for the rest of my life."

He is an inspiring man, off stage as well as on. There is a winning mixture of the

archetypal hero and a personality that clearly makes its own choices about everything. It's why his ballet-dancing has a unique three-way harmony: the street-boy's fabulous athleticism, perfectionist classical manners, and a yearning, generous heart that is all the more striking because he shows it so naturally.

He feels a powerful debt to his mother country, and is preparing – between a heavy schedule with the Royal Ballet in Moscow at the moment – to launch his first created show, Tocororo, at Sadler's Wells. This is a whistle-stop tour of all the Cuban dances that he loves, attached to a story of a boy's journey out of hopelessness.

"You mustn't expect a masterpiece of the next generation of choreography," he says

drily. "It's just for the public to have fun." Yet it premiered in Havana last spring, in front of Fidel Castro himself, who has promised his personal support for Acosta's plans for his own company back home in Cuba before long. The tocororo is the island's national bird, but Acosta is rapidly becoming a national figure to the proud, isolated Cubans.

"Carlos really is like the myth you hear," I am told by another fine Cuban dancer, Yat-Sen Chang of English National Ballet, who performs with ENB at Sadler's Wells next month. The son of a government culture minister, Chang watched the street-boy in the year below him at Cuba's national ballet school with fascination. "Because even the teacher who picked him up thought there was no future for that boy, although he had such a huge talent, because of the way he was, from the street. But he made an amazing change in himself. And he became someone incredible."

For Yosvani Ramos, several years younger, another top-quality ENB Cuban, Acosta was Nureyev and David Beckham rolled into one. "When I was a kid, he was huge. Baryshnikov and Carlos, it was for me."

Acosta is only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. Cuban male ballet-dancers are the talking point of world classical ballet of the past 20 years. Fernando Bujones and Andres Williams, two legends of American ballet, are from Cuba. José Manuel Carreño also starred at ENB and the Royal Ballet before becoming one of American Ballet Theatre's chief attractions. Chang's older brother Lienz is another, and behind them are emerging young Joel Carreño and the prodigy of competitions Rolando Sarabia. All from a poverty-struck, politically isolated island of a mere 10 million people.

Acosta – whose breakdancing is as fêted in Cuba as his ballet – says it starts with Cuba's mania for dancing, any time, any place. "People dance, jump, even if there isn't any music, just to have a good time. I'm sure the weather has a lot to do with it, but also

there was a period when you didn't have discos to go to, you just had to dance in the street, passing a house. If I was in a London shop and started dancing, they'd call security: 'There's a black dude here, he's crazy, he's dancing, get him out!'"

What he still can't quite explain is how a recalcitrant troublemaker suddenly found in ballet his moral salvation. His father, a devotee of the African Santeria religion – which favours animal sacrifices and voodoo communications with its gods – actually sent his youngest son to a Santeria woman to be exorcised (a scene that Acosta shows in *Tocororo*). Did it make a difference? "Nah!" he shrugs with a grin, "but I was mesmerised. She told me that I would go over the sea, go to places, things she could not have known."

A fascinating BBC documentary about him to be shown on July 9 shows his speechless emotion at driving back to the lowly street where he was born, meeting his childhood friends again, cuddling his fragile mother and chaffing his once-feared father, now 85.

Although Acosta's background is exceptionally poor, all the Cuban stars have taken a route to the top that is a triumph of Darwinian selection. Ballet is to Cuba what a job in the City is to Britain: high-flying, jetsetting, enormously rewarded and respectable. Fidel Castro has always considered ballet a vital part of the Cuban Revolution, the nation's highest display of its cultural superiority, and since his coup in 1959 he has poured state money into it.

In a speech in Havana last winter he announced proudly that an almost unbelievable 41,488 children had applied for the National Ballet School's 4,000 training places. Last year the school was expensively rebuilt to boost the expansion of ballet training, to which Castro gives personal attention. Could one ever imagine Tony Blair correcting geographical gaps in the distribution of ballet students? Theoretically, no child anywhere in the world is more welcomed into the art, and Acosta, Chang and Ramos all acknowledge it gratefully.

But the realities of Cuban life since the Soviet Union pulled out its enormous subsidies in 1991 are poverty, political repression and daily frustration. School may be a glorious monument to Fidel's belief, but it is tough just getting there in the morning.

Chang and Ramos reminisce about how as boys they got up at 5.30 every day to catch the unreliable 6 o'clock bus from the countryside in order to start class at 7. At 5.30pm

they were still in class, and might perform that evening too. "I don't know how I was capable of it," says Ramos, 24. The bus queue, they remember, was a daily bearfight.

"You learned to jump into the bus very quickly," says Chang.

Once into the national ballet school, still run with dauntless perfectionism by the great ballerina Alicia Alonso, the boys face a gladiatorial contest of macho bravura and personality. By 15 they are dancing such adult showpieces as *Le Corsaire* and *Don Quixote*, and frequent performances in front of an audience that cheers them on as noisily as a sports crowd turn them rapidly into fearless performers.

And then when they leave Cuba, they are, if not official pariahs, at least borderline defectors. Ramos will not risk going back to Cuba, because he fears he might not be allowed out again. He and Chang continue to support their families in Cuba from their earnings, without much hope of seeing their siblings grow up. It is a Third World situation producing first-class dancers, but both of them – though proud to be Cubans – want British passports.

Acosta feels differently. He is grateful for the superb artistic development he has received at the Royal Ballet, *Apollo*, *Song of the Earth* and *Manon* this year, *The Prodigal Son* with Sylvie Guillem next year – "It's the first time I'll dance with her – I've been telling her since I met her, 'Dance with me, man!'"

But at 30, he now worries about his lifestyle getting in the way of more important things – such as getting a girlfriend. "I am available! Please ring me!" he leans forward to shout into my tape-recorder.

For despite all the phenomenal but deserved world success, Acosta remains transparently and delightfully the boy happy to breakdance on a Havana street. "I worry a lot about what happens when Fidel dies, because I always have the Cuba of my childhood in my heart. That's the Cuba I want to retire to. Where I can go anywhere, sleep in my neighbour's house, in their kitchen, see the children playing on the streets, see everybody sitting on the sidewalk drinking rum. It's the only place where I won't be a foreigner."

- 'Tocororo' is at Sadler's Wells, July 15-26. English National Ballet is at Sadler's Wells, July 8-12. 'Carlos Acosta – The Reluctant Ballet Dancer' will be shown on BBC1 on July 9.

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