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CUBAN HEELS

Dancer Carlos Acosta will retire next year from the classical repertoire to continue his career in choreography and launch a dance company in his native Cuba. He explains his vision for the future

WORDS: **LYDIA BELL**

CARLOS ACOSTA IS in his Stygian dressing room, reclining with his legs propped at a 90° angle, the favoured position of off-duty ballet dancers. There are clothes everywhere, letters from fans, stacks of coins piled in a jar, a discarded mini bottle of wine, books he's reading, one of which he brandishes, saying "You've got to read these essays on ancient African cultures!"

It could be any boy's locker room until you notice the handsome portrait of him squeezed next to his mirror, a gift from an admirer perhaps. Currently he is hard at work on his last show at London's Royal Opera House — *Carmen*, which opens in the autumn and will mark the end of his 17 years there. In contrast to his vibrant, playful *Don Quixote*, which toured the States this summer, *Carmen* will be stripped down to its narrative fundamentals and Bizet's score telescoped to fit.

He tells me he has, over recent years, been honing his narrative sense. He has learned that choreography "is about the story, be that telling it with movement or with writing". He explains: "At some point in your development, you understand more or less how to do it. I was never going to be like the big choreographers, such as Kenneth MacMillan who knew from the start he was going to pursue a choreographing career.

"Coming at it from a dancer's perspective is entirely different. I've been very busy dancing for most companies

around the world for many years. But I always try new things. I try and try and try. Eventually I become good. Now I trust my own way of movement and my own ideas of how something like *Carmen* should go."

The development of a career in choreography in tandem with his dancing career reached its "turning point" when he choreographed *Don Quixote*. As for *Carmen*, "it's my production and my vision," he says. "Everything you're going to see has to do with me."

So what happens when the day job comes to a close? That will be at some point next year, with a round of farewell touring (he alludes to various classic venues in China and the United States). "Some time next year I'll retire from the classical repertoire. But I'm going to carry on dancing with my own company, which will offer a different repertoire. I'm going to set up a company in Cuba, and I will dance with them there and all over the world."

This is the latest obsessional project of this modern-day Renaissance man — the creation of a dance company in Cuba that could build a balletic bridge between Cuba and the rest of the world. He was talking about it as a theoretical possibility four years ago. Now he's made it a reality. Considering the machine of Communist Cuba's bureaucracy he's had to deal with, this is no mean feat. The dream is to bring global influences and influencers to top Cuban dancers, who are technically brilliant but are



Clockwise from left: Acosta dances *Don Quixote* at London's Royal Opera House in 2013; the Los Pinos area of Havana where Acosta grew up; Cuba's National Ballet School (Escuela Nacional Cubana de Ballet)



isolated from current thinking and suffering from a dearth of choreographers. A trip to Cuba in June this year saw him feverishly auditioning 50 dancers in their twenties and thirties, half contemporary trained, half classical.

"I'm going to try to concentrate on all things Cuban in terms of culture and rhythm. Even when I invite international choreographers to contribute I will encourage them to gain inspiration from the place and create a work that resonates as Cuban. It might be contemporary dance to Cuban music, or bata drums coming in."

The Cuban government has granted the company a temporary home in the leafy Havana suburb of Vedado, but the dream is to migrate to a new Arts Centre based at the Institute of Fine Art (or the Instituto Superior de Artes, ISA) on the periphery of Havana, which would host the company, a dance academy and workshops. It would become a cultural powerhouse and tourist attraction, but Acosta needs to raise US\$15,000,000 to get the project off the ground – and he admits that he has a long way to go. The Cuban Ministry of Culture is in the process of recognising the Carlos Acosta Foundation so that he can get the legal go-ahead.

In 1960s Havana, Cuban architect Ricardo Porro was appointed to oversee the creation of a complex of national schools on the grounds of a former Country Club. Porro designed the schools of visual arts and contemporary dance, while Italian Vittorio Garatti designed the schools of music and ballet and Roberto Gottardi designed the school of dramatic arts. But between ideological clashes and economic disappointment only the visual arts and contemporary dance facilities were completed; the rest remained unfinished and eventually deteriorated. It's the

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domes of Italian architect Vittorio Garatti that Acosta wants to resurrect. Currently used mainly for teenage love trysts, it is an eerily beautiful place, so quiet that your footsteps echo off the graffiti-covered walls. When that project takes off it will be electrifying.

"Once this happens and the academy is established, the ultimate goal is to go to different places in the world to audition for young dancers who meet the criteria, have the talent and really want the chance to dance. We will bring them to Cuba and educate them for free. This is what motivates me," he says.

Helping those who are financially unable to help themselves is close to his heart. Acosta's international status sets him apart in a way that few male dancers in history have managed. Like Rudolf Nureyev, Vaslav Nijinsky and Mikhail Baryshnikov, he comes with a backstory. His autobiography, *No Way Home*, introduces him as the poverty-stricken eleventh child of a truck driver, often underfed, forced against his own wishes into ballet school by his father who saw dance as a tidy little earner. As it turns out, he was right and Acosta is ever grateful. At 16, he won the Gold Medal at the prestigious





Clockwise from top left: Carlos Acosta outside the new school; a Havana street; the Gran Teatro de Havana and “gleaming” Capitolio; the domes of the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), which will house the new dance centre; Havana street musicians; at night the Gran Teatro



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ballet competition the Prix de Lausanne, training at the National Ballet School of Cuba and dancing with the English National Ballet, the National Ballet of Cuba, the Houston Ballet, and then finally London's Royal Ballet. He has taken most of the *danseur noble* roles in the repertory and danced with many of the leading ballet companies in the world, as Siegfried (*Swan Lake*), Albrecht (*Giselle*), the Prince (*The Nutcracker*), Des Grieux (*Manon*), Prince Florimund (*The Sleeping Beauty*) and Don Quixote.

Cuba remains Acosta's passion and inspiration. He blooms like a tropical flower there. Acosta's Cuban athleticism and Latin genes, and Cuba's culture and history, have pulsed through everything he has done, particularly outside the classical repertory. In 2003, his show *Tocororo: A Cuban Tale*, loosely based on his childhood, broke box-office records at London's Sadler's Wells Theatre. Last year, he became a first-time novelist when his magical realist novel *Pig's Foot (Pata de Puerca)* was published. The English version was by acclaimed literary translator Frank Wynne, who described Acosta as being reminiscent of "the late, great Angela Carter".

He is thrilled by the emotional change in the air in Cuba. As the world's media has obsessively charted, the island has, over the past seven years, been undergoing another form of revolution in ultra-slow motion. Economic reforms and a relaunch of the non-state sector, changes in the tax system and a profound reversal of its thorny relationship with the United States have all finally become a reality.

"Hope is growing everywhere. People are actually contributing to fixing Havana, buying houses and opening *paladares* (private restaurants). Old cars are being restored, the National Theatre and the Teatro Real (the home of the

"People are contributing to fixing Havana, buying houses and opening restaurants"

Cuban National Ballet) are being rebuilt, and El Capitolio, similar to Washington's Capitol building and one-time home of the Cuban Congress, is gleaming white again.

"It's wonderful. Everybody is hopeful again. There are a lot of ideas, a lot of prospects and a lot of contracts being signed. It's not going as fast as people would like and it may be that these changes are just happening in Havana, but not elsewhere in Cuba.

"I think Cuba should be open to the world and that's what's happening. There are going to be lots of debates and the people will rebel sometimes and it will go back and forth, but eventually we will find a chorus in which all these subsections of the revolution can be preserved, which is a noble thing. The most recognisable and admired reforms within the current system are in education and the freedom of healthcare for all. These should never disappear – and I don't think they will. But ultimately there is a need for economy, to be connected. If you don't have money, you can't make good art."

How does he manage to dance, choreograph, deal with the bureaucracy that goes with setting up a new school, raise money, write novels, and be a father to "cuddly, divine performer" three-year-old Aila? "I don't check my phone," he says. "The energy that it requires to really be a master at something is compromised if you are always doing that. You are pulled apart."

He takes an austere approach towards the subject of commitment to art over entertainment. "Nowadays we have to be careful. Young people want it all, now, but there's a lot of distraction. In my free time I'm choreographing, improving myself and reading. Striving for anything is hard and in our career it's a lifetime effort. You have to learn the basics and there are no shortcuts. You can't make your mark and have an impact in one day. Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but in literature and music and art, all the geniuses we know and that we have as heroes came from that level of hard work and dedication. "You want to be a dancer? Do it! A choreographer? Do it! Some of my ideas, like the dance academy, are long term, and others are medium term. I programme myself far ahead and give my energy. I want to look myself in the mirror and know I still have my passion." ●

The Carlos Acosta International Dance Foundation is restoring the School of Ballet with the agreement of the Cuban government, to create a special dance centre for Cuba. carlosacostafoundation.org