

# Carlos Acosta

PRINCIPAL GUEST ARTIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 9 September 2015

After his welcome, David explained that three organisations were involved in, and would benefit from, the evening's talk (Ballet Association, British Friends of Ballet Nacional de Cuba, and Carlos's International Dance Foundation) and suggested Carlos talk about the present and the future.

Carlos began by telling us he'd just come from a rehearsal for his new production of *Carmen*. His aim is not to recreate the period nor concentrate on the opera story. He has omitted some characters he considers irrelevant, thus focusing on Carmen, Don José and Escamillo, and the language will be a fusion of styles he's known over the years – ballet and contemporary. He's trying to get the dancers away from their comfort zone and demanding a lot of really difficult steps which they won't have done before. This isn't just the Principals but everyone will be doing difficult stuff so it shows the Company at a very high standard. Carlos is creating his own take on the story. There's will be guitarists and percussion are on the stage in the tavern scene, and a live chorus on stage singing to Escamillo in a Spanish version instead of French. It will be a big spectacle and one which we'll all enjoy!

They are using the Shchedrin score which is in copyright. In 1967 Maya Plisetskaya desperately wanted to dance the role and together with Alberto Alonso, the Cuban choreographer, they created the ballet. They first approached Shostakovich who was too busy to do the music so Plisetskaya's husband, Rodion Shchedrin, produced the score mainly for strings and percussion, based on the Bizet original. With that base they will create a bigger sound, using a full orchestra as well as voices which will sometimes be off stage, sometimes on stage but as a complement to the music. At the same time in the tavern scene there'll be some solo percussion numbers, with contemporary movement, which Martin Yates is constructing with a flamenco theme so it will be realistic and alive. The scenery changes from side to side and you go from the tavern scene outside to a campsite or elsewhere with a projection at the back to

indicate the move. The music is wonderful – one great hit after another – and for Carlos it is important that you don't see the dancers playing a role. You might wonder how can you not be yourself, but he intends to strip them naked so you see the character and not the dancers performing a role. It's very hard to do that but Carlos is pushing them to deliver the ultimate event. You have to reach for the sky, even if you don't get there, but it's only by trying that you can achieve it. It will be very hard

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because the dancers are so bound by classicism, but he wants it real so he sees you are a person not a dancer. It's very challenging but Carlos is enjoying the process – and we wish him luck!

Carlos had come from a full day's rehearsal. He's not just choreographing, he's also dancing both roles – “how crazy is that”, he said – but he loves the challenge and wants to go out with a bang! You'd better kill it before it kills you! It's going to be a big party and he enjoys it so much and wants the dancers to be part of it. He and Federico Bonelli will alternate in the two lead roles. He chose Federico because he suits the roles. And he has chosen partners whose heights complements each other. Federico is very professional, he gives 110% and he commits to it so Carlos trusts him. It will be interesting to see the differences between the two of them and how differently they play each role. There are a lot of great young dancers but this is about sex, life, jealousy and betrayal and you need to know about these emotions which are what make the piece. There's also a young cast and he wants to give a chance to somebody to be seen in a different way. Vadim Muntagirov and Matthew Ball will dance Escamillo and Don José, Tierney Heap will be Carmen. Carlos thinks she is very capable and will be

good in the role. David mentioned that he had done the same with *Don Q* by choosing someone young. Carlos said he wasn't wrong in his choice of Fumi Kaneko. She did so well in *Don Q* even though she was injured. Initially she was timid but it was a great journey for her, she was a wow and looked wonderful with Thiago Soares. She will also be in *Carmen*.

The Company has just performed *Don Q* in the States. Carlos said in his productions he doesn't want to go backwards. If you want to reconstruct a Jacobean building there is no point in doing it exactly. You half demolish it and you bring contemporary additions so they co-exist with the original. It's the same with *Don Q*. He didn't want it to look like the Kirov version. You have to deliver the essence of the classical ballet but it must be different. Now you can have the stage on different levels, with houses moving to create a different perspective. The artists shout and talk on stage as he's interested to know the characters rather than the dancers. They communicate through dance but they are people and he wants to see the people acting naturally. Carlos is trying to soften the old classical work and humanise it so that the audience connects more with it. The humour is current and not as it was at the time. He wanted the work to be authentic and unique.

Martin Yates, one of the conductors at the Royal Opera House, had re-orchestrated MacMillan's *Manon* and *Mayerling*. He's mainly a composer but did some tweaking of the orchestrations so they look bigger and more relevant to the story. Carlos asked what he could do that sounded different. It was very organic: Martin would do his research and Carlos would say he needed eight more bars to fill a gap. It's the same with *Carmen* where he wants to come up with something unique. During their tour, they performed 12 *Don Qs* in Washington and Chicago which Carlos described as wonderful. It was amazing that all of them had standing ovations regardless of who was dancing. It was a pity they didn't take it to New York as Carlos would have enjoyed dancing his last *Don Q* there. He did dance in New York but the rep changed and he danced the pas de deux from *Carousel* and *Song of the Earth*.

Carlos returned after the US tour to do *Cubanía*. He wants to share the culture of his own country and show some of its talent. They work together well with the contemporary dance company who have some of the greatest dancers. He put together some pieces he is fond of and then the second half was a condensed version of *Tocororo*. The idea was not to have the concept of dance but to have fun, have a good time and then have a drink, and see the best talent that Cuba can offer. It was mainly light-hearted but in the first half there were a couple of pas de deux which weren't so easy on the eye. He likes to move bodies in different places so there is a different dimension. They created some more gloomy dance in a story of a relationship that goes wrong with scat-

tered clothes suggesting the only way out of the monotony is to break up, but after that the mood lightens. It gave another talented Cuban choreographer, Miguel Altunaga, the chance to test his skills and make a piece and Carlos says they will work again together. He likes to come in with an idea but see it grow and develop with someone else's take which is more rewarding. There was a good feeling as *Cubanía* was going well and to have the Royal Opera House open on a Sunday brought in a new audience. David commented that the feeling at the stage door was very different.

In December, Carlos is putting on a classical programme at the Coliseum. There'll be two classical programmes before he finishes, this and another at the Royal Albert Hall in October 2016. He will also make some appearances in places where he has performed in

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the past, such as Houston and, if Kevin lets him, it would also be good to dance at the Met, as he almost had a second career there with ABT, as well as Cuba. He'd love to dance the three classics for his people – *Don Q*, *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* – if he's able but now it hurts so much! In December it's the *Carlos and Friends of the Royal Ballet* which they did already at Sadler's Wells when they won an Olivier Award. There'll be nine dancers including Marianela Nuñez, Valeri Hristov, Thiago Soares and Nehemiah Kish. So it's not a programme from scratch and is a classical selection which is a reflection of his whole career with eight pieces including *Scherezade*, *Winter Dreams*, *Mayerling*, *Apollo* etc.

Carlos works very hard and has also written an autobiography and a novel. During his career he's always felt he needed a change. Even in Houston he recalls looking at the schedule and feeling he'd learned everything and needed a change so he came here and was doing all the MacMillan roles and after a while something else had to happen so he began writing and experimenting. He even tried to sing but that was catastrophic and afterwards he couldn't talk for a week! But no one could stop him from trying and he had nothing to lose. Writing was a way of escape. You write about something from the past and then you come back to *Swan Lake* and do it better. It took 10 years to do the autobiography. After three or four years he came up with the idea of the novel and found he actually likes writing. He needs to connect to an audience and tell stories and he feels a necessity to keep a connection with his father who's no longer here and with days gone by. In literature anything goes and he gets ideas from overhearing a conversation. He said sometimes you have to disconnect because you go so far

that it's hard to come back. Carlos is looking forward to doing more writing in his spare time and also he is now a father – what spare time?

Film. Carlos met Natalie Portman with another actress whom he knew when they came to Cuba. Some time later he had a call to say there was a story which would suit him perfectly so they spent three days in New York making the film *I Love You*. Then another script came his way with one of the characters based on Carlos so the producer wanted him to play himself. Now the BBC have financed the development of his autobiography and they are in the last draft of the script so hopefully in a year or so they'll go into production. They're going back to his school and neighbourhood. Other offers to act in a couple of small roles have come his way and, although he had no ambition to act, it just happened and he thought why not?

Havana and the International Dance Foundation. Where did the idea come from? Carlos has to programme far ahead and began thinking what he would do once he has stopped dancing. One thing was clear to him and that was that education should be free for all. It's unfair that if you are born poor and can't pay for your studies you can't progress. Carlos had the opportunity but it isn't always the case. When it comes to money there are those who have it and those who have not and you lose a lot of talent from those who have not, so he wanted to give them the chance for the benefit of the world. Ballet shoes are expensive so impossible for them and you can't always rely on the generosity of donors. He wants to create a platform to give them the chance to dance for free.

There's an amazing space in Cuba but the government doesn't have the money to progress it as they have other priorities. He talked to the politicians about using the space which although in ruins has a theatre, three ballet studios, offices, and a school. It's all there and it's a legacy which he is going to fight for. Once they have it they will get teachers and go to disadvantaged countries to look for talent. If you have talent you want to do something amazing in life and they will get it for free. One day we will see this talent at the Royal as the world is small and it is something that Carlos believes in. The original buildings were Fidel's dream for arts schools. Some had been country clubs and golf courses and after the Revolution the idea was to use them to make the best arts schools in the world but out of five schools – contemporary, ballet, drama, plastic arts and music – the only ones completed and functioning were plastic arts and contemporary. The other three were unfinished but the ballet school was nearly completed though the director didn't think it was suited to ballet and it was abandoned. Norman Foster saw it and thought it truly amazing and is helping Carlos endorse the project. It's not so easy to get things done in Cuba but Carlos knows the Cuban way and how to make it happen! It's never

going to be easy – you have to have patience but never lose your perspective and where you are going.

Carlos believes it is necessary as an artistic destination. The next time we visit, he said, it will be in place for us to see – and then take a holiday! We'll bring the Royal Ballet and interview Kevin O'Hare and Marianela – and then go to the beach! It is important that Cuba is no longer isolated and he wants to welcome there everyone he's met in his career and his life. It's a great time and Carlos wants to be part of the change. The new breed of politician is addressing these things. Timewise, the application has been made for funding to the Jette Parker Foundation and Carlos expects the answer in October. They meet you half way and Carlos has a lot of people who are waiting to help. Everything can happen rapidly if they have the resources. The building is next to a river which floods – not good news. Resources for the river work and retaining wall have to be put into the plan and hopefully that work can start in January. Meantime he is putting a company together to be the resident company of that building though they will have to start elsewhere. Once the river work is done he can move the company in and it will be alive. It's all about confidence and step

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by step it will happen. The aim is to get the school in within three years. Before that there will be students in the temporary building: a small group to start with which will then expand.

This summer Carlos has been auditioning for the company. There's great enthusiasm amongst the young dancers. It will be a contemporary company and aiming for trying to match Cuban and foreign choreographers together to bring new ideas. It will be interesting to get Wayne McGregor there to work with the others so they create something that evolves into something else. The challenge will be to be inspired. He doesn't want to do the same rep as every other company, there's no point. He wants meet the challenge of getting a trade mark and making something that is unique so that what he brings to the table is different, new and fresh. He's in his comfort zone so is interested to do something that doesn't look like Carlos. That's why we like MacMillan, he said: you see *Romeo and Juliet*, *Song of the Earth* and *Judas Tree* and they could be by three different choreographers. That is evolution and that is what's worthwhile. He's taken dancers from the BNC and the contemporary company as well as other Cuban companies which makes a very diverse and interesting mix. There are some in pointe shoes, some in jeans, some barefoot

all in one piece. He doesn't know how it will look but it's interesting.

How do you choose the dancers? The essence and musicality is very important and they have to have ideas. When you see it you know it's right. He has to form them but he needs a base of good technique. His ambition is to have one ballet and one contemporary class. He chose about 25 dancers – roughly half classical and half contemporary – so there are strengths on both sides. They will mesh and he will train them so they could do something very avant garde. Then he'll ask choreographers to make what they want, and the dancers will be up to the challenge, be it a back flip or eight pirouettes! When do they start? There are already a couple of teachers lined up to work when Carlos isn't there, then some will just to come in for an individual class. If his friends are out on holiday they'll be coming along to help with teaching! It is all about giving and passing on experience which the dancers need. After five years of training we will be amazed to see them. Some dancers will go with Carlos on tour to Southampton, Nottingham, Birmingham and Manchester next May. The other half will perform in Cuba but they need to earn money. Carlos told the Minister that they need to find a way so they could perform at home because you only dance for a short period of time and money is vital. Once the company is funded, some can stay at home while some are travelling and next time vice versa. There are so many great theatres with facilities in Havana for them to use.

He'd like to bring in other companies as well. He did this with the Royal Ballet but, who knows, when Kevin is no longer there perhaps the next director won't want to do so. As for choreographers, there are a couple of young member of Carlos's company who are choreographers whom he'd like to use. A large part of the company is very young. He will go out to different parts of the country to see who has talent and needs help to develop their skills. Having a company will allow people to do that. He is keen for students from poor backgrounds in Latin America like Columbia and Mexico and also perhaps Africa. You hear about people on the internet and can go to audition. His Cuban friends all over the world will help to talent scout. There are a lot of poor people with talent who would never otherwise dance. We are all trying to save the world. We need to find talent and what better way than through art. Art is the first thing to lose out when times are bad; it isn't a priority when everything is collapsing but something beautiful gives hope and it should be high on the list of priorities.

Ramona de Saa, the Director of the National School, is someone who's like a second mother to Carlos. She selected him to go to Turin and, once there, prepared him for the Prix de Lausanne which he went to and it saved his life. Before he joined ENB, he already was in the corps of NBC. Ivan Nagy was Director of ENB and was auditioning. He wanted to hire Carlos as a

Principal aged 17. He was going to the Prix and Ramona said instead of going home he should go to ENB and that saved his career, otherwise he would have ended up in Mexico or elsewhere. It was very brave of Ramona – she had to explain and stood her ground saying it was an opportunity for Carlos, which would only come once. Dancers are competing against time so he ought to take that chance to be principal at ENB. When he went home to Cuba it was as a Principal.

Fernando Alonso's programme of teaching in Cuba produced a factory of wonderful dancers but it's a mystery why. It is to do with the passion of the teacher, and the organisation of the system. Everyone is trying to convey the same message. Ballet in Cuba is a wonderful thing so everyone wants to jump higher and do better than everyone else. There's an amazing energy and it pulls you in. They plan to build a school and do more and more. It is collective and Cuba is like that and the sense of community is positive and gets results. They've

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got some of the best dancers in the world and are in every company in the world. They are hardly ever in the corps but are all Soloists and Principals. But it has been declining. In Carlos' generation they learned piano, and how to read music, but it no longer works like that as teachers' salaries are so small so no one wants to teach piano.

Alicia Alonso has been director of the Ballet Nacional for so many years. She was one of the most amazing ballerinas ever and was way out of this world for her time. A founding member of ABT, she had the world in her hand but decided to be part of the revolutionary process and create the school and company which they all came from. She is the First Lady of the nation. She was Queen in New York but she came back and they love her because of what she has done for them. She has such a great force. A doctor once told her if she kept spinning she would lose her sight. She said she would keep dancing even though this might happen, which it did. Green spot lights had to be precisely placed at the front and back of the stage and she relied on her partner to lead her. You have to respect all that she did for the love of her art. She is completely phenomenal. At the age of 60 or 70 she did things which the young couldn't do! Most people retire at 40 but she believed that 40-70 was her prime. 'At 40 she said you haven't seen anything yet, wait until I'm 60!' She looks a million dollars on the videos.

Loipa Araujo, Josefina Mendez, Mirta Plá and Aurora Bosch, the four Jewels of the Company, were around when Carlos was there but he didn't dance much with BNC, just touring in Spain for two summer seasons in 1993 and 1994. He knew them but didn't work with them very much. Loipa he brought to the Royal Ballet and now she is with Tamara Rojo at ENB. When he did *Spartacus* she was teaching at the Bolshoi and helped him to learn the role.

Asked to look back on his dancing career and pick a few highlights, Carlos said the Prix de Lausanne in 1990 which changed his life, the Royal Ballet visiting Havana in 2009 was something he couldn't have dreamed of, and *Spartacus* at the Bolshoi. Add to that *Don Q* (his baby) and bringing his family here to see him dance *Swan Lake* with the Royal Ballet.

Describing briefly the Royal Ballet's tour to Cuba, Carlos said there had been the taking of Havana by the British in 1645 and then the taking of Havana by the Royal Ballet in 2009! There was only a dilapidated

theatre so they had to improve that and put up giant screens for outside transmissions. They had performed in Washington before that and then on to Havana. He was there with his company in his own country and it was surreal to dance in the Karl Marx Theatre with the Royal Ballet! The orchestra said it was insane! It was the most amazing gift. The Royal Ballet contributed through a very generous donor £2 million to make it possible as they could make nothing from ticket sales. There was a party at his house and it was a wonderful experience.

In conclusion, David thanked Carlos very much for coming and for everything he had done throughout his career, inspiring ballet audiences here and around the world. Everyone should experience dance in Cuba, not just the BNC but also Carlos' company and school once it's set up. An additional collection for Carlos's Foundation was held on leaving. In all £1,150 was raised for the Foundation during the evening.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Carlos Acosta and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2015