

# Sonata for a Prince

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Carlos Acosta Quesada just belatedly received the National Dance Prize for 2011 from the National Council for Stage Arts (Cuban Ministry of Culture). This exceptional, African descendent dancer, this goodwill ambassador and citizen of the world, is still virtually unknown in his own country.

He is a man who has triumphed by virtue of resistance. Born in 1973, in Arroyo Naranjo (a capital city neighborhood), his father was a descendant of slaves from the Acosta sugar mill, in San Juan y Martínez (Pinar del Río). He finished his ballet studies at the National School in 1991, under the auspices of the Cuban National Ballet's fifth jewel, Ramona de Saa, who was baptized as his fairy godmother, and of Mirta Hermida. They both shaped his future, as his guides, and that teacher-student relationship brought forth a horizontal relationship like the kind that can exist between parents and children. Both of them, as well as Lázaro Carreño, the man who taught him at his most advanced level, put all their pedagogical effort and professionalism into getting him to the highest of heights.

Thanks to the academic and cultural exchange between the National Ballet School and the New Theatre Ballet in Turin (Italy),

Carlos was chosen along with another new dancer, Ariel Serrano, to join the Italian company. This served as early preparation for the Grand Prize he received in Lausanne, Switzerland, in the youth category.

He was awarded many prizes during his time as a student, among them the Paris Biennial's dance Grand Prize, the Chopin Medal from Poland's arts society, and the Cuban Grand Prize for young interpreters. After that, he won the Merit Prize in Positano, Italy's Competition for Young Talent, and the Young Artist Prize from the Princess Grace Foundation, in the United States.

In 1991, he joined the Cuban national company, in which he would become its premier dancer during his first year. He has danced with prestigious figures like Sylvie Guillem and Lucia Savignano. This 'golden mulatto,' as his critics and admirers call him, has danced with the National Ballet of England; the Houston Ballet, and has been an invited artist with the Teatro Carreño (Caracas, Venezuela): the Ballet of Santiago de Chile; the World Ballet's Gala of Stars, and on the most important stages around the world.

Acosta is the first Cuban male ever to dance with the Paris Opera, in which most dancers come right out of their own school.

Earlier, fellow Cubans Alicia Alonso and Josefina Méndez had done the same. His work with it involved dancing Rudolph Nureyev's *Don Quijote*.

In his singular career, Carlos Acosta has danced the part of many princes: Spartacus, Romeo, and Albrecht. Yet, this is quite difficult for dancers who in the context of the Cuban ballet are socially categorized as black. Those who manage to ascend somewhat—like Andrés Williams, Pedro Martin, Catherine Zuasnábar, and Caridad Martínez—feel the fatigue of intolerance and the whip of discrimination. Martínez is the current director of the Brooklyn Ballet, and the first mulatto woman to have a career in the Cuban National Ballet. Yet, because she was black, she was never able to play Giselle. A ballerina for whom choreographers Brian McDonald and Alberto Méndez have personally created dances is nowhere to be found in the National Dance Museum. She has never been forgiven for her complaints about Alicia Alonso's directing methods, and about obvious discrimination against blacks, and the exclusion of black dancers.

As far as skin color is concerned, the national company is not very balanced; the memory of the absence of myriad, Afro-origin dancers from leading roles is still quite vivid. All they did was try to put all their personal effort into being the best Cuban dancers. Carlos has ennobled the name of Cuba and those Afro-origin dancers who have been unjustly ignored by the political authorities.

Cuban society continues applying a stereotyped form of racism to this black dancer, a man who works to interpret ballet's most classical and romantic roles. The ambiance is even more hostile at the National School than within the national ballet troupe. Cuban society is narcissistic, and skin color has a great deal of influence on social relations. In the mentality of a significant part of Cuban society—regardless of race, politics or

social position—the stereotype of blacks is that they are appropriate for folklore and modern dance, but not for European music. According to them, blacks are not apt for those rhythms, so they cannot play princes. All this amounts to is that blacks still cannot achieve the place they deserve in this particular branch of the arts.

For Carlos Acosta, dancing is his greatest glory, his most intimate free space. He is an undeniable dance icon for the twenty-first century, and somehow represents all those who served in the ranks of the National Ballet and are today top figures in companies all around the world. Their aptitude has allowed them to collaborate with choreographers of all styles and places.

In 2004, *Dance Europe* magazine elected him the best dancer, when he danced the role of Spartacus for the Bolshoi Ballet of Moscow, a very traditional company that does not tend to invite outside dancers. Carlos Acosta is only the second foreigner to whom the Bolshoi has entrusted this important role in the *Spartacus* ballet's 44-year history. As a dancer, his mastery and charisma has captivated audiences in the United States and Great Britain. He is currently an invited dancer with the London Royal Ballet, the Kirov Ballet of St. Petersburg, and the American Ballet Theater. He has also received honorary doctorates from numerous universities.

Reality has shown that African descendants are able to interpret the great classics and also play the role of princes and Willies. I am particularly taken with how Carlos looks with Tamara Rojo in *Manon*, and with Viengsay Valdés in *The Corsair*. When compared to specialized, international journals, *Cuba en el Ballet* is very cautious in its promotion of Carlos Acosta's career and success.

This prince of dance is a goodwill ambassador, the idol of new generations, a man and friend of whom I feel proud. Cuba is home for him, his family and friends. As a citizen of the world, he needs her to be able to breathe.