

The Royal Ballet in Cuba: A Blessing and Tribute

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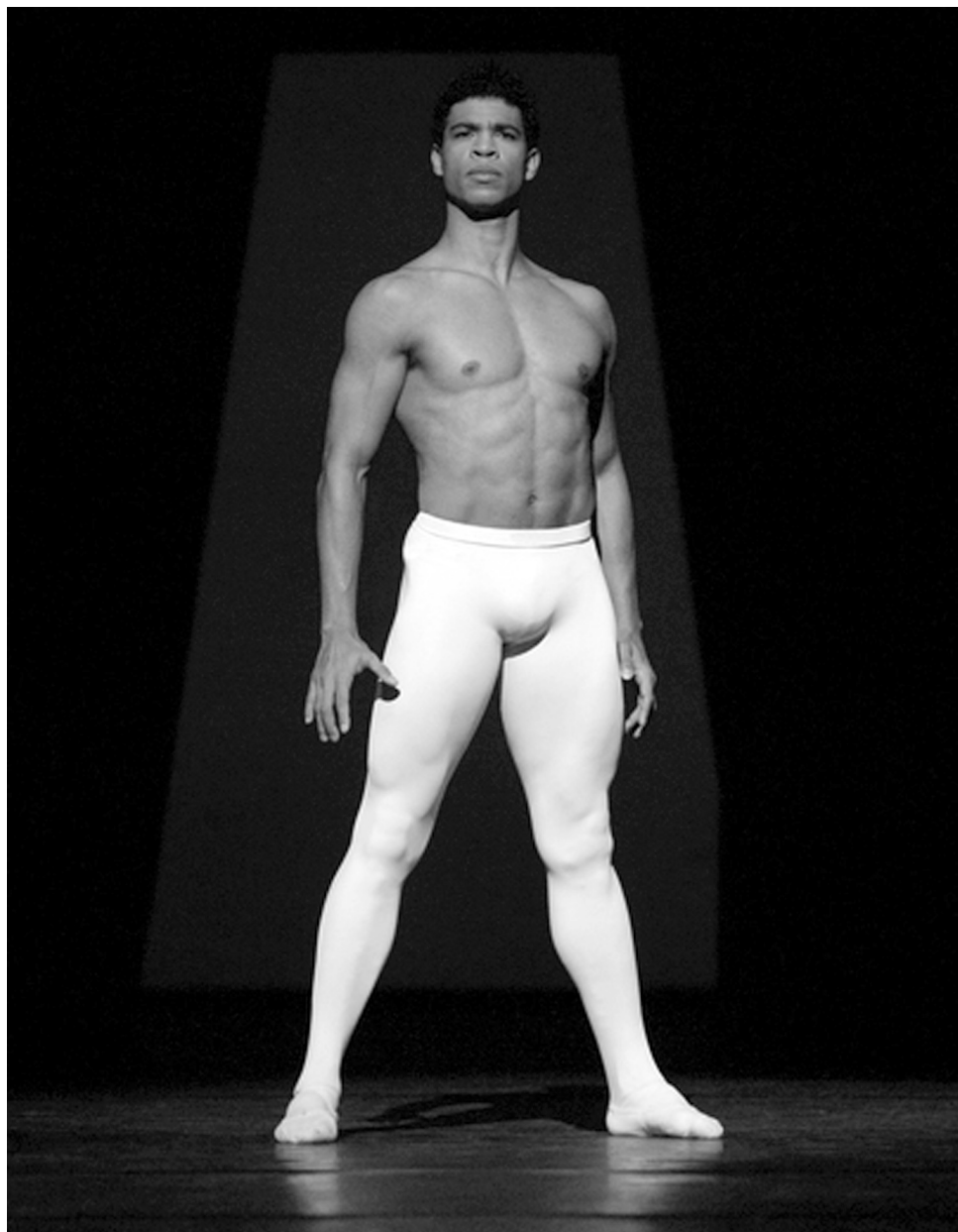
The blessing

Despite my hazardous return home, which is situated in a dodgy, marginal neighborhood of the darkest and hottest city in the hemisphere, I traversed a crowded and impenetrable Havana night with the sense that few things had ever given me as much satisfaction as my daughter and I having been able to see the ballet *Manon*, by Kenneth MacMillan, at the Karl Marx Theatre. With leading dancers Carlos Acosta and Tarama Rojo, and the entire London Royal Ballet Company, the performance's beauty, unflawed professionalism, and the thousands of hearts united there to witness them, made for an aesthetic joy hard to forget.

I believe that neither those of us who somehow had the luck to obtain some of the nearly inaccessible tickets to this grand and exclusive venue located in the Miramar neighborhood, or those who enjoyed the performance on screens situated outside the theatre, itself, will ever forget the technical rigor and interpretive excellence with which those dancers from that prestigious cultural embassy regaled us. In five performances, the company's principal dancers, who came to Cuba from all corners of the planet, and moved with an impressive expertise spanning from the most classical forms to the freest, modern moves yet

unknown on the island, demonstrated the highest level of achievement yet to be attained in dance around the world.

This famous troupe delivered an incredible performance of the highest quality possible, and impressed specialists and fans with the superiority of its designs, scenery, and costumes. Above all, though, the greatest impact came from the sustained and balanced nature of the interpretive quality of the leading dancers, the soloists, and the whole troupe. The Royal Ballet's sojourn to Cuba was a blessing for lovers of dance. Moreover, we congratulate ourselves for being able to see the brilliant and incomparable principal dancer Carlos Acosta. He is a star and the company's undeniable icon in the twenty-first century's dance world. It is fascinating to see how despite the difficult obstacles he had to face during his childhood, during the adolescent period of his artistic formation and growth, Acosta has reached the top. Moreover, he decided to continue with ballet and be both a universal Cuban and an island one, sharing his talent and greatness on stages everywhere. His performances have garnered him acclaim and pampering. He has earned merit and prestige sufficient enough to bring to Havana an artistically exceptional troupe that none of the arrogant, hegemonic powers often vilified by the Castros, or even the



Carlos Acosta as Apollo

Cuban National Ballet's Alicia Alonso, could get in the same way.

Only this man's greatness was able to bring to a country whose economy is so impoverished an artistic spectacle of this great level. Monica Mason, the Royal Ballet's General

Director, has tirelessly expressed her satisfaction and pride at having Carlos Acosta as a principal dancer. She has also repeatedly explained that his presence and leadership in the company are primarily responsible for the troupe's historic visit to Cuba.

For their part, the authorities, official press, and Alicia Alonso, one of our national history's most committed and widely known racists, have abstained from acknowledging the great divo. Despite this, when this principal dancer went out with his friends to greet people after his memorable performance on Wednesday, July 15th, at Havana's Gran Teatro, and at the Karl Marx, on the 17th, he revealed that he was still just a simple and noble Cuban, in spite of his successes and laurels. One cannot help but admire him even more for this humility.

While not surprising, the way in which the government and cultural authorities have reacted to or received the gift this great company has given us leaves a great deal to be desired. In addition to not explicitly and profusely expressing the merited acknowledgment and gratitude warranted by this situation, they also missed a marvelous opportunity to honor Carlos Acosta, Monica Mason, and the whole troupe with well-deserved academic, artistic or governmental awards or recognition, which would have done much to raise the profile of our nation. Yet, conspicuously absent from this visit were any of the titles reserved for illustrious guests, the keys to the city, the *Giraldillas* (insignias of distinction, from Havana), honorary doctorate degrees, a *Premio del Gran Teatro* (an award from the most important theatre), or any other prizes that would make this list unbearable long. The visitors had to accept only the highest prize possible; the infinite gratitude of Havana's public.

The Royal Ballet's sojourn to our city once more shows the simplicity and humility of those who are truly great, how far behind we've fallen with regard to the evolution of modern ballet, and that Cuba is the only country with a dance tradition that has to accept as charity an artistic gift like these performances.

This experience also shows us the low artistic potential of the Cuban ballet company, which has been decimated by the continuous stampede out of Cuba of young talent that is struggling to shake off a yoke that rejects and ignores its efforts to seek new horizons relative to its personal and artistic realization.

Cuban lovers of ballet are delighted to have received this gift from Carlos Acosta and the Royal Ballet. It is the fulfillment of a long awaited dream. No doubt the political and cultural authorities have been left with the bitter taste of once again having confirmed the fact we are too poor to be able to afford a performance such as this in a country where stars like Caruso, Ana Pavlova, Aran Jachaturian, and Nat King Cole once shined.

Tribute

To see Carlos Acosta become a paradigmatic figure in global dance, leading one of the most prestigious companies in world, and being acclaimed by a Cuban public (and practically ignored by the official press) can also be taken as a deserved and long awaited tribute to that group of outstanding black dancers that has had to endure rootlessness and nostalgia to be able to free themselves from the racist ways with which the Cuban National Ballet has closed or made difficult the road for them. They have had to shine at other latitudes, without the cultural authorities or media recognizing even their names or successes, which deprives Cuban—particularly younger ones—of enjoying and being proud of the goals and achievements of people who are virtually unknown in their own country.

Whether on stage or in the hearts of tried and true ballet aficionados, other stars have shined on memorable nights of torrid Havana Julys besides Carlos Acosta's. Among them was renowned dancer and choreographer Jorge



Tamara Rojo and Carlos Acosta

Lefebre (Santiago de Cuba, 1936-1990), who in squandering his temperament, vitality, and Cubanness still made it in the Academic Ballet Theater, the Ballet del Siglo XX, and the Ballet Royal de Wallonie (Belgium), where he was director till the day of his premature death. Another is Caridad Martínez, who thirty years ago emerged as one the most exceptional ballerinas of Cuba's history. How could one forget her incomparable interpretation of *Muñecos*, the ballet-pantomime by choreographer Alberto Méndez? In the mid 1980s, Martínez burst onto the national scene with her Ballet Teatro de la Habana, a very highly rigorous company as far as technique and style go. Currently, she currently directs the Brooklyn Ballet. Catherine Zuaznabar charmed her public and critics in the second half of the nineties with her excellent interpretive skills in the most famous roles of classical ballet. Then she later went on to distinguish herself as a principal dancer on the world's most coveted stages, under the direction of the

great Maurice Béjart. Two other people whose talent and devotion to global dance belong in the company of these other stars but are rarely or never mentioned in Cuba, are Julio Arozarena and Amilcar Moré.

To see Carlos Acosta, from his position at the very top, appear before his public and take into account the heights to which those Afro-Cuban dancers, who are unjustly ignored by political and cultural authorities, have elevated the name of Cuba can also serve as a symbolic tribute to so many unknown black children and adolescents who for so long have had their aspiration to show off their talent and devotion to the art of dance frustrated.

The Royal Ballet's visit to Cuba is already history. It is a history that those of us who are grateful for its influence will never forget because it has served to show or reaffirm for us just how behind we are in the realm of economics and culture. Above all, it has shown us how much we need to change on human, ethical, and artistic levels.