

Cometh the hour, cometh the man



photo: Gautier Deblonde

Ismene Brown meets Cuban dancer Carlos Acosta, rescued from a life of petty crime to become the new Baryshnikov - and possible saviour of the Royal Ballet

"I was stealing, fighting, all that. My father took me to a dance school against my will. I thought it was for women"

When someone writes the movie of Carlos Acosta's life-story, they will have a hard time winning credibility for their script. "So this poor boy from the worst streets of Havana in Cuba - closed country, right? really poor, right? - is turning to crime, when his father forces him to do ballet to keep him from jail, okay? And he becomes the hottest young dancer in the world. Then he joins the Royal Ballet - and get this, he's black. Only the company is collapsing, but his star-power saves the company."

Well, all right, I made the last bit up, but the beleaguered Royal Ballet must be praying that will also be true. For if anyone could bestow a blessing on a ballet company in time of need, it's 26-year-old Carlos Acosta.

The man from Havana has a reputation to put any star in the world on their mettle. Even better, he is not coming in as a guest star for a handful of performances, like Igor Zelensky and Sylvie Guillem, but wants to be one of the guys, has joined the payroll to do what he is told.

Already, a bare week after arriving, he was mucking in, as I discovered the day of our interview. That morning, before rehearsal, he had been performing to the mostly black inner-city London children involved in the company's education project, A Chance to Dance.

One can imagine how those youngsters must feel, the boys in particular. For Acosta is already a world star, and the only black world ballet star. On Acosta's side, too, meeting the eight-year-olds of Brixton and Lambeth had a powerful resonance.

"I used to be one of them," he said, his mobile face suddenly looking as if dowsed in bad memories. Actually, even the most deprived British kid is unlikely - one hopes - to have

experienced quite as desperate an existence as he did.

Though he's inevitably been hailed as the "heir to Baryshnikov", he has more than a touch of the young Cassius Clay in his fast, intelligent, charismatic speech.

"You know how I started? I came from a very poor background, really poor. It was like the Bronx in Havana. I would probably have been a delinquent, I was stealing, fighting, all that. In Cuba they take good care of you if you dance, feed you, look after you. When I was nine, my father took me to a dance school against my will. I thought it was for women."

Mr Acosta, a truck-driver with 11 children, showed phenomenal foresight, because though his youngest son was kicked out of the first school at 13, he insisted he stay in ballet, sending him to another town, where Carlos's new teacher, Ramona da Saa (of whom he is immensely proud), realised what she had.

Within three years she had taken the 16-year-old youth to the gold medal and Grand Prix at the Prix de Lausanne, the most prestigious student ballet competition in the world.

"It was the most incredible thing." Acosta's face split in a great, boyish beam. "How much trouble we had to get there, visa trouble, travel trouble, no money, and no one spoke Spanish. I was the very last person to get into the competition - there were 127 people and I was number 127."

He was snapped up instantly by a Turin company for leading roles, and within a year was hired by English National Ballet's then director Ivan Nagy.

No one who saw young Acosta hurtle across the Festival Hall stage in ENB's *Spectre de la Rose* in 1992 is likely to forget it. I remember the electrifying height of the jump, the leonine physique trailing petals, the ecstatic grin on his face, quite unsuitable for the role but utterly infectious.

"Ah, I was like a wild horse then," he says, laughing happily. "I had many opportunities - I was supposed to do *Coppelia* with Eva Evdokimova - incredible, an 18-year-old with this megastar, wow!"

An ankle injury and a botched operation put paid to these extraordinary chances, and indeed to Acosta's first possibility of auditioning for the Royal Ballet. He was sharing a flat with ENB's top male star, another magnificent Cuban, Jose Manuel Carreno, who then moved to the Royal Ballet.

Both were jinxed by injury, and in time Carreno ended up as American Ballet Theatre's star and Acosta as Houston Ballet's, under the English director, Ben Stevenson. As so often in Acosta's life, it turned out exceptionally fortunate for him.

"I learned so much in Houston for those four years. That ballet is not just about the steps but about how to do them, that it's about seeming effortless, so the audience can sit back and relax. In Cuba it's about whoosh, bam, big JUMP (he made a few more rocket noises). That's fine but it doesn't apply to everything. There's also all this ..." (he stretched his hand out gently and poetically) "...and it's beautiful."

Acosta, Carreno, Lienz and Yat Sen Chang - two more Cubans at ENB - how does Cuba produce such marvellous male dancers when it has for so long been closed and when it has only 10 million people? And besides, when its dance culture is so saturated with the country's African roots?

"It's many things. Cuba being Communist, the country has always looked seriously for children that have talent, and then money is not an issue. Also in Cuba we don't have so many distractions.

"And of course Alonso inspired everyone. She is on the level of Fidel Castro." Alicia Alonso was one of the century's greatest ballerinas, a megastar in the States in her 20s,

who returned to Cuba determined (like Ninette de Valois here) to grow a ballet culture from scratch. She continued to dance indomitably into her seventies, raising several generations of men for whom she set the highest standards, in order to be worthy of partnering her.

The women, of course, suffered. "Yes, but in my opinion that is also because you know Cuban girls tend to be very voluptuous. It's in their bodies"... and his hands shaped big curves with relish.

His own girlfriend of two years is Houston's leading ballerina, Tiekka Schofield (a Manon whom Kenneth MacMillan adored). She is now with Acosta in London.

Cuban boys over the last 30 years have imbibed classical style by exhaustively picking over Nureyev and Baryshnikov videos. "It was the main way we learned. We would ask each other in class, does this step look like Baryshnikov did it?"

But there is also a unique shading of African rhythm in their ballet-dancing, an instinctive pliancy and spontaneous rhythmic finesse. Acosta, unsurprisingly, is also a champion salsa and break-dancer.

Why did this bravura, big-scale man want to come to the Royal Ballet now?

"The Royal is top of the line," he said, scoring an instant loyalty bonus. "Anthony Dowell was one of the greatest dancers of the century. I wanted to be mature enough to come here. I want to learn the repertory here - I like Christopher Bruce very, very much, I like MacMillan very much."

He makes his debut, though, in William Forsythe's raspingly physical modern ballet *In the middle*, somewhat elevated, opening the company's Sadler's Wells season on Tuesday (October 20). He will be thrown in at the deep end of English style at Christmas in Ashton's *La Fille mal gardee* - which even for someone as keen to learn as he looks like a wild bet.

How can he fit into a company as third or fourth cast when for years he has been top dog in Houston?

"I know things might not be given to me right away, and I am not very pushy because I understand those things. That's how I want to prove myself. But I don't want to be typecast, because that's not interesting, and I will go elsewhere if that happens."

Does he ever get afraid?, I ask this supremely confident but notably modest character. "I have felt afraid," he says doubtfully, "but I don't feel pressure. I do what I can and my art is sincere. I enjoy life, so people will see it. I go on stage and I say, I am here! This is my world and have a good time!

"I am the luckiest person in the world. Oh my God, my life is a great ride. You travel, you see all these places you never dreamed about, I danced in Paris, I went to Greece and danced at the Acropolis, I am here in London. I do what I want to do and what I enjoy - and I get paid. I am 26 years old and I have seen almost the whole world. Who is more lucky than me?"