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## Soaring, sexy and spontaneous

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Ismene Brown

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### Ismene Brown reviews *Tocoroco - A Cuban Tale* at Sadler's Wells

There is potential theatre in the personal story of any very great dance artist. Let's leave aside the cute, dull stereotyping of films such as *Billy Elliot* or *Centre Stage*. The Margot Fonteyn story, the Rudolf Nureyev story, the Mikhail Baryshnikov or Sylvie Guillem stories, they are all tales of dancers conquering adversity. Often there is external adversity to overcome, but it's not so much a hostile world as a hostile self that they have battled with, the indolence that stops most of us bothering to realise our dreams.

Carlos Acosta's story is as colourful as they come: ghetto roots, delinquent disorderliness, transfiguration and world supremacy in the most refined of performing arts, classical ballet. It makes for a wonderfully vivacious and heartfelt show, as he's conceived it in *Tocororo - A Cuban Tale*, a dance-musical premiered last year but now back to enliven London's summer.

We are in that mysterious, captivating melting pot of Cuba, where African drumbeats meet Hispanic sexual arrogance and Russian classical ballet. The small island has produced an extraordinary contingent of world-class male ballet dancers over the past 20 years. How do they do it? Why do they do it? This show doesn't answer those questions directly, but it does give a clue to Acosta's own deep, almost fatalistic attraction to self-discipline.

He plays *Tocororo*, a thinly disguised version of himself, and what a performer Acosta is – I can't think there is a more exciting and adorable male dancer in the world today. Ballet, breakdancing, salsa – that panther body can do any of them, and as a personality

he can't help making you love him. His nephew, Yonah, plays the boy *Tocororo*, a dazzling lad who shows from the demanding first scene a similarly precocious physical and lyrical expressiveness.

*Tocororo's* tale is set up as a conflict between the posh introspection of ballet and the street-cred and sexiness of Cuban salsa. The country boy longs to join his more knowing city cousins. He can't do salsa, they mock his ballet. Of course, he solves his identity crisis – he learns to salsa as superbly as he can pirouette, and his girlfriend has added ballet to her sexy hip-shimmy.

Simplistic, yes, and Acosta has shied away from including a plausibly sinister subplot that could improve the drama. Still, with a terrific, assertive band on stage, stylish Havana backcloths, an occasional drive-on by a gleaming red Chevrolet, and some brilliantly effusive performers, the narrative creaks are more or less covered. The production's informality complements the spontaneous combustibility of Cuban music.

Acosta dances his heart out, soaring and whirring in exultantly boyish physical stunts and lightly self-deprecating comedy, but also touching in solos on the loneliness of being driven by one's gift. Verónica Corveas, his vibrantly sexy salsa partner, has also a beautiful balletic line and elasticity – she's a treat.

Equally engaging is the tall, snake-hipped Alexander Varona as the city slicker, a splendid comic virtuoso, and the gusto of the ensemble from Danza Contemporanea de Cuba is infectious. Some performances will be led by Scottish Ballet's appealing Cuban principal José Perez.

- Until July 24. Tickets 0870 737 7737

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