



How Cuba became a hothouse of ballet

Ismene Brown

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Fidel Castro's impoverished island has become a production line for the world's best young dancers. Ismene Brown went to Havana to watch them in action and to meet the woman whose vision – and blindness – are responsible for their unique talents

This could only be Havana. Palm trees sway over gracious colonnades, and the shark-finned, swell-hipped Hemingway Chevrolets belch fumes at the boxy little Ladas and bicycle-taxis blaring salsa in their wake.

Hollywood meets the Third World, Spanish flair meets Soviet brute functionalism, European cultivation meets African drums. And from this contradictory place are emerging some of the greatest classical ballet-dancers of the world today.

Carlos Acosta and José Manuel Carreño, who have shone in London at the Royal Ballet and English National Ballet, are the leaders of an increasing flood of top-class Cuban dancers into the free world.

ENB now has three Cuban principals, San Francisco Ballet and Boston have five, New York City Ballet wants Carreño's younger brother. Some are defectors, others retain Cuban links, but all are dancers of uniquely Cuban bravura and personality.

How could a poor, blockaded island of 11 million people do this? It cannot just be political engineering. With the biennial Havana International Ballet Festival imminent, and appearances by the Royal Ballet's top stars, Alina Cojocaru, Johan Kobborg and Tamara Rojo scheduled, it was time to find out.

Tuesday October 26: The dilapidated headquarters of the 150-strong Ballet Nacional de Cuba has a lobby, a small open courtyard and two studios. I stare at the ragged floor in the studio upstairs where Acosta bounced from a ghetto upbringing to the top of the world, where Alicia Alonso devoutly took class until she finally retired from dancing aged 74.

Alicia Alonso. Prima ballerina assoluta, legend and devil-woman; the fount, inspiration and potential downfall of the Cuban Ballet. I am to meet her tomorrow. Meanwhile I look in pleasure at Yoel Carreño, the young half-brother of José Manuel, and the latest talent of the extraordinary dancing Carreño family.

He is a Matt Damon lookalike with power and pride like Baryshnikov. And he will be partnering Tamara Rojo in Swan Lake. It should be good.

Wednesday October 27: Into one of the holiest places in Cuba, Alicia Alonso's office. The extent of Alonso's power, as it is relayed to me, has astonished me.

She can kill visa applications with a phone call, she can turn a hoodlum child into a hero by press-ganging him into ballet. And it was magic how she could dance ballet better than anybody even though she was blind – but you must not talk about this.

Alonso has grown into her own marvellous icon. Royal blue turban and matching dress offset a face of regal bones over which the 83-year-old skin stretches artificially tight, and the mouth is a magnificent slash of red. Dark glasses hide her eyes, and she offers her handshake to the air a foot to my right. She obviously cannot see.

Her story is astonishing. Raised by her wealthy Spanish-Cuban parents to a life of privilege and private dancing lessons, she married a fellow student, Fernando Alonso, at 16; they took the boat to America where their only daughter Laura was born soon after.

Joining the fledgling Ballet Theatre (now ABT), Alonso looked up to Alicia Markova, the era's greatest ballerina, whose mysterious delicacy contrasted with her own sexier femininity. But before long the Cuban was considered as great a Giselle as the Englishwoman, and premièred important ballets by Agnes de Mille, Antony Tudor and George Balanchine.

In her mid-twenties Alonso suffered detached retinas, and ever since has battled with the onset of blindness while continuing to dance. Here must lie the clue to the exceptional qualities of balance and control in Cuban dancing.

"Have you been in our school? You must, we are most proud of it," is her first remark. It is a Caribbean voice, lilting and passionate.

Her privileged upbringing made her determined to bring ballet to all Cubans and she set up her first school in 1948: "I was very conscious of it. Because the talent could be anywhere, a family of artists, or a daughter of a miner. The talent exists, we have to find it."

The annual talent-trawl up and down the 800-mile-long island is one of the Cuban Ballet's strike forces. Acosta, for example, was a delinquent street child, and the first children in Alonso's national school, founded in 1962 and enthusiastically backed by the new Castro regime, were taken from Havana's orphanages.

I tell Alonso it amazes me that a young ballerina should want to start a school at the height of her fame, a story like Ninette de Valois's in Britain, though de Valois was not a top-rank star.

"Ninette did a fabulous job in England, fabulous," says Alonso sincerely. "But I had the advantage over her because I could not only talk about it and teach it, but I demonstrated it too. And I could tell the boys how to partner me."

Ah yes, and she was blind. The men must have had to hold and catch their boss exceptionally carefully. This explains the renown of Cuban partnering.

Thursday October 28: At the festival's opening gala, I see the majestic, stylish strength of the company from apprentices to stars, and I hear one of the worst orchestras imaginable.

It is immediately apparent that the Cuban company has a gigantic obstacle to world standing, and it often resorts to CDs. No choreographer worth their salt could deal with such musical ineptitude.

Frederick Ashton's *Les Patineurs* makes a baffling appearance, its pas de deux danced gracefully by two talented Cubans who appear to have no idea what ice-skating is – and why should they?

They staged it from a video, Alonso told me, adding that she danced it at ABT for Ashton, who had asked her to join Sadler's Wells Ballet (fascinating facts I cannot find in any Ashton biography). She wants to mount the whole ballet next. I gulp.

Friday October 29: To the school, a splendid Havana palace newly restored on Castro's command.

I see heartstopping girls with frightful dance shoes. The shoes are made in Cuba, ill-fitting but able to last in the great heat, unlike a recent donation of prettier Chinese ones which collapsed.

A class of 14-year-old boys is taught with magnetic kindness and fastidiousness by Ramona de Saa, whose teaching method is now adopted throughout Cuba and much of South America. One boy is Acosta's nephew, Yonah, whom Britons took to their hearts in Acosta's show *Tocororo* this year.

He will be great, probably greater than Carlos, smiles his teacher. At the end of class, bravura pirouette competitions always erupt. Young boys grab rockers cut off old rocking chairs, stand on them and spin and spin – apparently a uniquely Cuban trick.

I watch a *Giselle* matinee, where the delicate, menacing Wilis send shivers down my spine. Sadler's Wells chief executive Alistair Spalding arrives from England to negotiate the Cuban Ballet's appearance in London next August. At the evening gala, wonderfully, the CD in *Le Corsaire* goes wrong.

As Yoel's beautiful cousin Alihaydée Carreño and her partner struggle to adapt the

bravura steps to skipped bars and manic repeats, someone stops the CD and the pair finish their dazzling feats without music, while the crowd ecstatically roars the tune. It is the first great souvenir of the festival.

Saturday October 30: Of the two world-class young male stars now, Rolando Sarabia, 22, is luckier than Yoel Carreño, because US immigration passed his lucrative contract with Boston Ballet while Carreño's move to New York City Ballet was felled.

At 24 Carreño is ripe for development into greatness. He is partnering six ballerinas in the festival in nine different ballets over eight days. Only an intelligent artist and a very well-trained dancer could do this.

To such a dancer the narrowness of Cuban repertory – swinging between Alonso's stagnant productions of classics and dreadful new choreography – must be depressing.

He turns my question away courteously: "We love to dance here, we dance all the time, on the street, at parties. Here we have a human warmth, the weather, the beaches... and the audiences are fabulous."

But when I ask about the New York frustration, his face clouds: "I try not to think about it."

Sunday November 1: A gala marking George Balanchine's centennial. It should have included New York City Ballet dancers, but the US has recently tightened travel restrictions with Cuba.

Cuba pretty much dances Balanchine without permission or guidance. Alonso claims special privileges, as one of his favourite ballerinas, but what she remembers 50 years on is not necessarily accurate, nor can she see to correct errors.

A new Cuban ballet about Salvador Dalí is the first of the festival's many contenders for worst ballet ever made.

Monday November 2: I watch a compilation film of Alonso in Giselle, and cannot stop crying. It shows an extraordinary artistry, even when she was nearly 60. The blind eyes give an intense inward poetry to her second act, the stiff full body dances on iridescent, fairy feet.

Cojocarú and Kobborg arrive from London, tiredly walking hand-in-hand. They are shocked by the heat.

Tuesday November 3: Morning class, and Cojocarú and Kobborg are dismayed to find the studio open to a public whose only chance to see foreigners is this biennial festival.

Cojocarú tells me unhappily that her high-tech Gaynor Minden pointe-shoes are softening in the 88-degree heat. By the day's end, the other dancers are whispering about "the best ballerina in the festival, maybe the world".

US election night is accompanied by a spectacular eclipse of the moon.

Wednesday November 4: The company's leading teacher, Loipa Araujo, tells me that when Alonso danced, green and red lights were placed on stage to warn her where edges were, and that other dancers would cough or sniff to show their positions.

She reveals, to my delight, that Fernando, Alicia's husband and the company's formative teacher, made all young dancers learn to balance and turn with their eyes shut.

Admired at the Royal Ballet as a remarkable coach, Araujo is thought Alonso's likely successor.

"Triunfo de Bush" is plastered over Mexican CNN and Havana cheers itself up with a stupendous full-length Don Quixote by the home team of Viengsay Valdés and Yoel Carreño. It is a fantastic party, alone worth the trip.

Rojo arrives from London. "I love this heat," she says.

Thursday-Friday November 4-5: Two Swan Lakes. Cojocarú is declared an incredible White Swan, Rojo an incredible Black Swan. The Royal Ballet's musicality, clarity and dramatic sophistication captivate the Cuban dancers, though they don't like Kobborg's unflamboyant finesse.

Saturday November 6: Final day and the Royal Ballet trio tell me that Covent Garden docked their salaries for the appearance – as normal for international galas – but they performed for no fee, so are heavily out of pocket. I wonder at such hamfisted handling of these precious stars.

The London flag has flown high, presenting a musical and emotional sophistication that has the Cubans admitting that, yes, they need better orchestras and production values. At the closing gala, Rojo dances a fabulous Don Quixote pas de deux.

Sunday November 7: I leave torn between extremes of optimism and pessimism. The Cuban Ballet's structure is built with palpable love, its school feeder system possible

only under such a political regime. These are blissfully joyful and carefully trained dancers, and in Alonso they have a great model. But Alonso has now become the problem.

I shut my eyes and imagine a woman pirouetting in the dark, searching for the glow of a light to anchor herself to, inventing a new technique. By visualising inwardly the mechanics and ideals of ballet-dancing, I suspect she pioneered and passed on to today's Cuban dancers an unmatched command of balance, as well as a unique, old-world gracefulness.

And yet her blindness is blocking creative rejuvenation no less damagingly than the US blockade, driving dancers into unhappiness and even defection.

Ironically, the more walled up it is, the more the Cuban Ballet could mutate merely into a nursery for fine dancers who leave for greater rewards abroad. If that humiliated Castro, I wouldn't cry, but I would for Alonso, whose vision, impaired as it became, was magnificent.

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