



Carlos Acosta may not have many ballet years left – but the Cuban star is taking charge of his destiny. He tells David Jays about his portfolio career: director, novelist and founder of a ballet academy.

Taking chances...
Carlos Acosta rehearsing *Don Quixote*
with Marianela Nuñez and (opposite)
in *Day of the Flowers* Photos: Johan
Persson/ROH; Soda Pictures



Life is a big journey,' says Carlos Acosta. Ballet is a very big part of my life – but it's just a place on that journey.'

On a warm day, we're sitting in an airless interview room at the Royal Opera House in London. I've

met other dancers there who have come straight from rehearsal and who will scurry back as soon as we're done. Acosta, however, has to fit me in between meetings. As well as the starriest name on the Royal Ballet's roster, he's increasingly also a producer, choreographer and impresario – not to mention an actor, novelist and burgeoning director of an ambitious ballet academy in his native Cuba.

To juggle all these projects with a demanding performance schedule is a rarity, but at 40, Acosta recognises the day when he'll leave the ballet stage is approaching, and he won't be short of options. He considers his ever-diversifying portfolio career. 'I'm up for this challenge because I have nothing to lose,' he says. 'Baryshnikov did it, Nureyev did it – any artist wants to carry on but not repeat themselves, to keep going.'

On stage and off, Acosta is still the handsome charismatic who has dazzled audiences. The lively whorl of curls is there, and the bold planes of a face that can amplify fun and fury through the auditorium. If the vaunting leaps are less heroic, he still commands the stage, plush as a panther. He registers the defiant nobility of Albrecht and Siegfried, and also the anguish of heroes in Kenneth MacMillan ballets like *Mayerling*, *Gloria* and *Romeo and Juliet* (which he performs opposite Tamara Rojo in London and Queensland this summer).

He's at home here in London. Born in Havana and trained at the National Ballet School of Cuba, he finally left the country in 1993 to join Houston Ballet. Five years later, he came to Covent Garden, where for over a decade now he has been a Principal Guest Artist. I wonder if he had any kind of career plan 20 years ago. 'I didn't have much of a dream,' he reflects. 'The dream was to be the best that I could be as a dancer. When I arrived in London, I submerged myself into some years of depression. I was trying to find my way into the company, but there were not enough shows for everybody and I started to doubt myself. There were a lot of stars here, I had to join the queue and wait my turn.'



As he moved up the queue, opportunities opened up, and he has now added director to his armoury. Following Nureyev, who had a string of productions to his name, Acosta made a fine beginning with *Don Quixote* in autumn 2013 – the show will return to Covent Garden in November. Russian companies famously attack the splashy score with all guns blazing, but Acosta tuned a sweeter version for his London colleagues.

Quixote, the elderly and deluded knight, may have a head full of fantasy, but he's no idiot, and Acosta treats him with infinite generosity. Kitri and Basilio, so often a brittle pair with eyes only for each other, are also kind to him: accordingly, we love them even more. Marianela Nuñez, who danced Kitri at the premiere, told me that Acosta instructed the cast to act as much as perform. 'He says, "Guys, you are great at making it real" – he wants us to use those skills. That is why it will look fresh and exciting.' Acosta confirms that dramatic truth directed his path through this boisterous ballet. 'That was always my intention. Some productions use *Don Quixote* as a character nobody cares about – but it's his journey. The audience must remember what they're invested in.'

Unveiling a transition in front of colleagues who know you as one of them can be tricky. Nuñez appreciated the challenge of Acosta's emergence as a producer – 'it's incredible, what he's doing.' They have often shared a stage – she credits him with plucking her from the corps for a gala performance of *Diana and Actaeon* – and she was unstinting with admiration when we spoke during rehearsals. 'He is explaining the style, the choreography – he has to do the talking and the dancing too, and that takes energy. But he's the right person to do it – if anybody has that energy, it's him.'

How did Acosta himself find the process? 'It was very educational for me,' he admits in a phonecall after *Don*

A different dynamic...
Acosta in rehearsal for *Don Quixote*
Photos: Johan Persson/ROH



I may fail, but at least I'm trying to bring something to the table

Quixote has completed its first run. 'I was doing this for the first time with my colleagues – it's a different dynamic.' Adding to the pressure was not only the responsibility for a repertory standard that has never quite taken hold in the Royal Ballet – but the knowledge that it would be broadcast live in cinemas throughout the world during its run. Every decision, he discovered, was finally down to him. 'How long is the cape? How big is the knife? Sometimes we would be lighting until 9pm on Sunday, and start again the next day.'

Making decisions could seem daunting after a career taking other people's corrections, but Acosta has no timidity about seizing the reins. He has long been keen to demonstrate 'the ability not just to be a pawn – that you actually have something to say and an artistic vision. If the evening fails, I fail – but at least I'm trying to bring something to the table. We [dancers] are interpreters all the time – but if you just stay there, you don't grow. Sometimes you have to take chances.'

The next big chance comes with the latest of his summer productions – popular evenings which have variously showcased ballet highlights classical and modern, new works and dance informed by his Cuban heritage. You can take the boy out of Cuba – but you'll never take Cuba out of the boy. Acosta's birthplace permeates so much of his work – for the page and screen (in his acting debut in *Day of the Flowers*), as well as his own popular productions. He first created *Tocororo* in 2003, in which a ballet boy discovers his street smarts and learns to do the Havana hustle. Dancers from Britain and Cuba will feature in *Cubanía*, which includes 'a condensed version of *Tocororo*, which is more about the dance rather than the story. I also wanted to include some more contemporary work.'

Cuba is almost a character in its own right in his autobiography *No Way Home* (2007) and in *Pig's Foot*, a magical epic tale. 'Cuba is a beautiful country, but it's still very isolated,' he says. He hopes to bridge that isolation



Nice artistry... Acosta in *Don Quixote* and (opposite) with Natalia Osipova in *Romeo and Juliet* Photos: Johan Persson, Bill Cooper/ROH



with an ambitious dance academy – giving something back on a grand scale. In order to give, he first has to get – fundraising is under way and Acosta has already realised that it's a skill all its own. 'In the fundraising world, you can't improvise, you need all the answers to all the questions,' he says. Does he enjoy the strategies of schmooze? 'I hate it,' he groans. 'I hate to ask for anything, I've always been very independent. If I had the money, I would do it myself.' However, building a landmark dance academy is a mighty task, and Acosta feels a responsibility to do it properly. 'This is for the benefit of my people. It's very noble.'

Straight after *Cubanía* opens, Acosta will choreograph a major new production of the Broadway musical *Guys and Dolls* for the Chichester Festival. 'I've diversified myself,' he declares. 'I'm a curious person.' No kidding. 'I have equally enjoyed writing and creating works like *Don Quixote*. I have another movie that I might do. I'm fundraising for my

dance centre in Cuba, which is my legacy. I have so many other things. My life is broader.'

He has no plans to desert the stage, though when those ballet legs finally give way, contemporary will be the way forward. 'I still have so much to say,' he insists, 'I need to find a new vocabulary and deliver my artistry with that. I'm going to reorient myself.' However much you plan a retreat from the classical roles – and Acosta is clearly more strategic than most – it can't be a simple matter to untangle himself from a discipline that has defined his life since childhood. Does he find it an emotional process, I wonder? His eyes narrow, and he doesn't quite answer, merely saying, 'I've given it thought for a while. I've seen people retiring before my eyes, so I've been processing these feelings.'

Whereas retirement catches some dancers unawares, Acosta is a pragmatist. 'I tell you,' he says, 'I'm more aware of this situation. I'm 40. If I get injured now, I ain't gonna spend one year to recover – forget it. That's why I have to be really focused.' Acosta's classical days are far from over. He continues to reprise favourite roles, and has formed an explosive partnership with Natalia Osipova, the Royal Ballet's new star – but is now conscious that each may be his last go-round. 'There are some ballets that only come around every three years – I might not be around three more years. Like *Mayerling*.' MacMillan's tormented historical epic is a relative rarity – Acosta's triumphant performance last season may have been his final crack at the traumatised prince.

Although these landmarks are inching forwards, he hastens to add that 'I don't think like that in production. I try to take each day as it comes, and when I walk out I try to enjoy it and deliver my very best. The level is still high, and I still have what people are coming for. Maybe the elevation is not as great, but at this point, who cares? I did all that. Nice artistry, the way you partner, the rapport – these are the key points I'm going for. Every time I go out it's a joy and I do my very best. That's it.' He ends the conversation with a high five. The future can wait.