

# MOWING

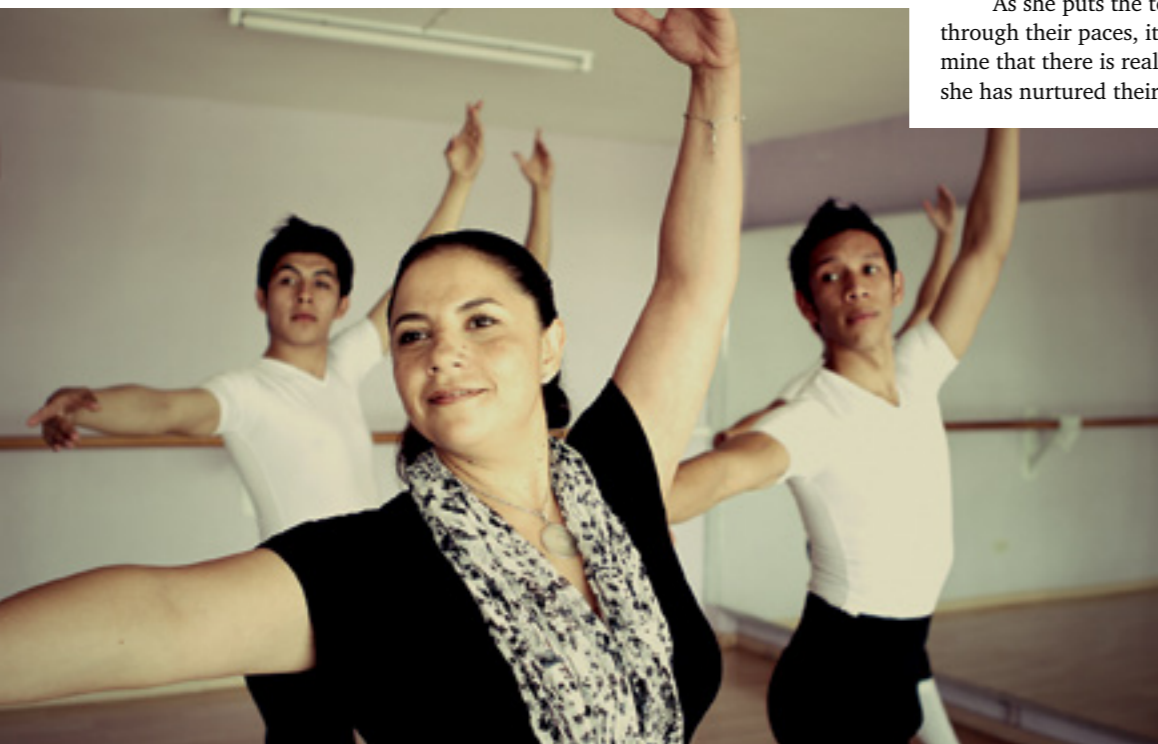
Who says Mexicans are too macho for ballet? Will Grant meets RAD teachers and students leading a boom in Mexican classical dance.

# MEXICO

**N**estled beneath the twin volcanoes of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl – the former still puffing smoke from its recent activity, the latter its dormant companion – is the small town of Cholula. Residents here are used to the occasional disruption caused by their famous landmark, the periodic eruptions of steam and ash which shower down on the town like a dusty snow and force airplanes on the flight paths above to be re-routed away from the white plumes.

Popocatepetl, popularly known as ‘Don Goyo’, was immortalised in Malcolm Lowry’s novel *Under the Volcano*, about an alcoholic British consul drinking himself to death in the shadow of the mountain ridge. His slow demise into delirium, his hallucinations and mezcal-fuelled stupors, and ultimately his broken heart might make good material for a ballet. All the elements of love, loss and magic are there, and one could easily picture a dance of haunting beauty set beneath the volcanoes themselves. If anyone were to adapt the novel, they wouldn’t have to look far for dancers to perform it.

*‘The boys turned up to be around girls, but they’ve fallen in love with dance’*



La Maestra...  
Ivonne Robles Gil  
(left) with her class

Mexico, it seems, is enjoying something of a boom in classical ballet. The Royal Academy of Dance both reflects and fosters this progress, noting an impressive spike in examination entries and a dedicated new cohort of RAD ballet teachers. In Cholula itself a growing group of young men and women are trying to make a life for themselves in the discipline, breaking some deeply ingrained cultural norms in the process.

‘I started to dance at 18,’ remembers 26-year-old Miguel Calderon. ‘It hasn’t been easy. My parents didn’t support me when I said I was going to start ballet. I was a football player, but when I finished high school I met La Maestra Ivonne and she said if I wanted to be a dancer, she’d help me with a scholarship.’

‘La Maestra Ivonne’ is Ivonne Robles Gil, an RAD registered teacher from Guadalajara who runs the Antoinette Dance Company in Puebla and has spent the past 27 years in the profession. Fiercely proud of her art, she has been a tireless campaigner for greater funds and improved access to cultural activities like ballet for many years.

‘Mexico has improved a great deal in terms of ballet,’ she tells me as her boys – ‘*mis niños*’ as she affectionately calls them – warm up before class. ‘Classical dance has become more widely available in recent years, particularly among men. Now you find many more male dancers including some who have achieved national and international acclaim.’ This, she says, has opened the minds of boys who might have wanted to take ballet classes but were fearful of the reaction in what is a notoriously *machista* and often homophobic society.

As she puts the teenagers and young men in her class through their paces, it’s clear even to an untrained eye like mine that there is real talent in the room. Little by little she has nurtured their raw ability and cultivated them into

refined and very skilled dancers, some of whom are now performing abroad or becoming teachers themselves.

‘Two years ago, I graduated as a professional dancer’, Miguel says with a bashful smile. ‘But I’ve always had to work that little bit extra to move my career forward. It’s tough for a male dancer here in Puebla to move on, or to be able to count on the support of his parents or the rest of society.’ In the discipline and rigours of the RAD examination and grading system, Miguel says he found a career path which appealed to him and, over time, has led him to teaching. ‘I give classes in several states in Mexico, including in Oaxaca, here in Puebla and I’m starting in the eastern state of Veracruz,’ he says.

Yet he faces many of the same challenges as a teacher that he faced himself as a student, namely prejudice. It is not uncommon for boys to hide the fact they are receiving ballet tuition from their parents, at least until they become so proficient that families accept their choices. It might all sound a little like *Billy Elliot*, but in some of Mexico’s more violent rural regions, such decisions can have serious consequences.

‘When I started giving classes in Oaxaca, it was just girls. But a handful of boys came in and clearly wanted to learn,’ Miguel explains. ‘While they were making jokes about ballet, I challenged them: “I was a football player too,” I told them, “but I bet you can’t handle an hour and a half of one of my ballet classes.” Well, they accepted and now I have 11 boys learning ballet! And what’s great is they don’t care anymore. They might have first turned up to be around the girls, but now they’ve fallen in love with dance as well!’

Faustino Rios, one of the more accomplished dancers in the group, is also on one of Ivonne’s discreetly administered grants to help people from poorer backgrounds study ballet. Initially encouraged to take up dance by the teachers on his university drama course, there



## *'It's tough for a male dancer here to count on support from his parents or society'*



In their veins...  
Julieta Navarro and  
(right) the boys'  
class in Cholula



is little doubt that he has found his natural vocation. 'I like to say it's my religion, because when I dance I feel the connection between my psyche, my soul and my body, and I become a complete person. That's why I never miss a class!'

But it's not just great leaps being made by men in Mexican ballet. In a hot, airless studio on the other side of Cholula, RAD teachers from across Mexico have gathered for a master class in Benesh Movement Notation. As they confidently follow a series of seemingly indecipherable marks and squiggles on an overhead projector, the teachers are a good illustration of the state of ballet in the country.

Old and young, experienced and new to the profession, they represent a range of RAD-registered schools from poorer rural regions to big urban centres alike. During the week-long course they receive expert tuition under the watchful eye of Julieta Navarro, the RAD's Mexico and Central America Director. She remembers when you could almost count on one hand the number of decent teachers and dance companies in Mexico.

'When I started here,' says Navarro casting her mind back more than 25 years, 'there was a very small group of teachers, mainly in Mexico City. But the Academy has been working hard to train new teachers, which allows us to open new schools and take on more students. Now I'm pleased to say there are very few states where we have no academies at all,' she says, motioning towards the studio where the teachers themselves are in class.

Perhaps, then, these are the first eruptions of a potential explosion in ballet in Mexico. But beyond the work of the RAD, what wider social factors are driving this boom? 'I'm absolutely puzzled,' Navarro admits. 'How come that many boys from very humble social backgrounds – where they have never seen a ballet nor ever been around classical music – how come they get involved in this and are so enthusiastic?' Answering her own question, she continues: 'I think it comes from them. It's in their veins, in their souls, to really want to learn ballet and to dance.'

It has also been crucial for the budding stars of tomorrow to have someone to look up to in the ballet world, such as Isaac Hernández, perhaps the most recognisable face of Mexican ballet. A native of Guadalajara, he formerly danced with San Francisco Ballet and is now a soloist with Dutch National Ballet in Amsterdam. I caught up with him on a rare visit back to Mexico, where he was attending a gala in his home town.

'It's a huge responsibility,' he says of his role as icon for young Mexican dancers. But it's clearly a responsibility he relishes. 'It's my job to try to improve the situation in ballet here in Mexico so that these people that believe in it or have been inspired by my story can have access to a decent ballet education in the country and can have the opportunity to have a professional career.'

The key may be to make ballet more available and accessible to Mexicans, and to break down assumptions

that it is a pastime exclusively reserved for the educated and wealthy elites. Few have done more in that regard than Ivonne Robles Gil, who regularly travels for hours with her dancers into far-flung mountainous parts of Mexico to perform ballet in remote rural and indigenous communities. Unlike the aggressively macho attitudes they have found in some towns and cities, she says her company was initially received with hesitation by the people in the countryside. But over time, that hesitation has given way to interest and, eventually, involvement by the indigenous and *campesino* families.

'Neither I nor my dancers are paid for this work. We do this out of a sense of vocation and because I instill in them the idea that they must give back what they have received,' she says of her students. 'It would be wonderful if more teachers and more dancers did this kind of work – altruistic, supporting the indigenous people and communities in the mountains. If more of us got involved in giving back a little of what we've received, Mexico would be very different.'

## A NEW WORLD

How is the RAD's world map changing? Andrew McBirnie identifies emerging markets.

Examination entries offer a clear guide to the RAD's activity around the world. Some of our mature markets like the UK, Australia and South Africa have plateaued in recent years, but we've seen significant growth in central America and south east Asia. During 2011-12, there were 52,600 exams in south east Asia – roughly equivalent to the size of the UK market; in China, India, South Korea, Malaysia and Singapore, combined entries have increased by 30% over the past five years. There has also been notable growth in central America: 17% as a whole, and in some countries over 40% (16.5% in Mexico).

These trends go far beyond dance training. Many of the countries experiencing major population growth are in Asia, and the RAD Board of Trustees commissioned an interesting report recently noting a huge expansion in the urban middle class in south east Asia. It's an immense potential market for ballet and ballet exams.

My suspicion is that there is similar growth in areas like music, sport and other forms of dance: top-up educational activities that parents will pay for. There's an aspirational respect for the classical arts in emerging economies, and the RAD's progressive structure of learning, assessed at each stage, is an established and proven model of education.

The Academy was once associated principally with countries with which Britain had former colonial links, but the picture has changed markedly in recent years. The RAD now has wider currency around the world, and the more markets we operate in – and the more diverse they are – the more insurance we have against turbulent economic conditions. It's important that the RAD remains abreast of these trends and invests human capital in our growth markets – opening new offices, recruiting examiners and running courses and other activities for teachers. There's great excitement about this changing world.

**Andrew McBirnie is the  
RAD's Director of Examinations**