

Talks at GS

Carlos Acosta

Director of the Birmingham Royal Ballet

Nishi Somaiya, Moderator

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[MUSIC INTRO]

Nishi Somaiya: Good afternoon, everybody and welcome to Talks at GS. I'm Nishi Somaiya, Global Co-Head of the Growth Equity Business in the Asset Management division. And I'm also an avid ballet fan. So, I'm beyond excited to welcome Carlos Acosta here with us today. Internationally renowned dancer and director of the Birmingham Royal Ballet.

Carlos was born and raised in Cuba and trained with the National Ballet School of Havana. And after winning a succession of awards, went on to dance professionally with

a number of prestigious companies around the world, with London's Royal Ballet becoming his home.

After 28 years, Carlos retired from classical ballet in 2016 and hasn't quite hung up the ties just yet, despite him declining to perform for us today, but he did tour earlier just this summer with his On Before program. And will be returning to the stage in November at Sadler's Wells alongside Alessandra Ferri in Birmingham Royal Ballet's "Curated by Carlos" program.

So, Carlos, I'd love for you to share some of your background with us. I mean, the story, it's incredible. The youngest of 11 children. Being sent off to ballet school at the age of nine. A father who was passionate about the arts. Tell us a little bit more about your upbringing.

Carlos Acosta: Yeah. Well thank you, Nishi. Thank you. Thrilled to be here speaking to you all.

Very humble place. I used to live in a barrio in the outskirts of Havana called Los Pinos. So, to give you some context, going about the streets of the barrio, full of

potholes. No shoes. I ate my pet rabbit at some point. So, I think that kind of background so that you know where I come from.

My father was a devotee of the Yoruba religion. We had a pantheon. He had his own pantheon at home. It is a religion that comes from the West of Africa and it's very common in Cuba as well. So, all of that was my environment.

Very free. Very loose. Liked the streets a lot. Liked to dance a lot. All the Cuban dances. And also breakdancing, which was in fashion at that time. But I didn't like ballet very much. Well, in fact, I didn't know what ballet was. My father was a truck driver. And we used to get his means by his salary, which was the only salary at home. He would spend weeks transporting in his lorry selected fruits all over the country. And then one day decided, had this idea, that I was going to become a ballet dancer without consulting me. And, obviously, that was quite embarrassing for somebody who lived in Los Pinos. But I didn't know that that was going to soon become my fate.

Nishi Somaiya: There was a focus, I believe, in post-revolutionary Cuba on the arts and the leadership really focusing on building up the ballet. Tell us a bit more about why that was and how it shaped some of the incredible talent that's come from the country.

Carlos Acosta: I think what they did is to involve the government, get their hand on a big, big grip in terms of giving everybody the accessibility. That allowed families like myself, very poor backgrounds, to study ballet. Which as we know, it could be quite expensive. And so, that meant that we had more chances to discover talent in the most incredible places. In the countryside. Some of my fellow students, colleagues, auditioned while driving horseback, for instance.

When money is no longer an issue, then you have more chances because the access or pool of talent, it becomes a lot wider. And I think this is what it was in Cuba at the time.

So, basically it was you, your talent, and your perseverance. And anything you could do, it was there for

you to reach. And so, that's how I became a ballet dancer, through that scheme that the government created. And I think it has given out to many generations of Cuban artists, of all ranges, from music, from painters, from writers, that already now they're scattered all over the world, but I think it was a big, big boom for Cuba, especially in the '70s and the '80s as a result of this free education scheme.

Nishi Somaiya: You've talked a lot about a love/hate relationship with ballet. I've read being expelled from school at a young age, ballet school at a young age. And then perhaps later questioning your career choice at some point. Tell us how you reflect on that.

Carlos Acosta: Yeah, I mean, obviously, ballet is very structured. Obviously, I didn't know anything about ballet. Also, my parents. And so, it was a big clash because when you start to study ballet it could be very tiresome in the very beginning for a nine-year-old who wanted to be in the streets and was completely restless. So, all of the sudden you are listening to piano music, which my ear wasn't accustomed to, and to study all these movements very

slowly, which would provide the foundation, the very beginning of what comes after.

And so, I really hated it. First of all, my father and my family didn't count me with what I wanted to be in life, which actually was more like a football player or some kind of a sportsman. That's what I wanted to be. And all of the sudden, against my will, pushed me into that direction. And it took me three years until finally they kicked me out from the school. And at that point my father had just gotten out of jail and realized that I was no longer in the school. And so, I had to be transferred to a boarding school in Pinar del Río, which is a city three hours from Havana.

And that filled me with this kind of loneliness because I was there for two years and hardly in those two years, I hardly could come home. And I was a teen. And so, I think in the beginning I hated ballet because of many reasons. But I somehow displayed a talent to absorb movements of all kinds, not just breakdancing or salsa, but also it turned out to be ballet as well.

But I always had these angels that you have in life from

time to time that really work with you and help you to see things more clearly and put you on the correct path. I had an amazing teacher, I have amazing teachers, that invest in my talent, that saw my potential. And that filled me with confidence. And I used that confidence to get to the next step until, you know, I developed this amazing career that led me to be here today.

Nishi Somaiya: It's remarkable resiliency as a teenager and to channel that mental strength into developing that creativity. And ballet has, obviously, taken you all around the world from your childhood, you know, winning the Prix de Lausanne at the age of 17. Being invited to join the English National Ballet at 18, which is when you moved to the UK. How lifechanging was that for you?

Carlos Acosta: Well, winning the Prix de Lausanne at the age of 16, for me, it was still the most amazing. I still remember, if I close my eyes, I remember what I felt. It's amazing because basically I went from the mango tree to the Prix de Lausanne, basically. You know? From Cuba, then I arrived. And obviously we were 127 competitors there. And I won the competition. And that filled me with

so much confidence. And obviously, when I returned to the school, because I was representing the school in Havana, and just to celebrate with all my colleagues-- so, I was no longer a boy in obscurity, but I was somebody who could have a future in dance in a big way.

And obviously, that led to another. While I was there, I met somebody who came to audition me in Cuba and then gave me a principal contract here in London at the age of 18 when I was dancing at the English National Ballet. I remember meeting Lady Diana, because she was the main sponsor or ambassador for the company. I remember when she came to meet me because she wanted to meet the new principal dancer arriving. I was 18. That was in the Royal [UNINTEL] Hall in 1991.

So, all those things, I had to pinch myself. To say that all of those things were happening to me. And then, obviously, my career began escalating and escalating until, like you say, it took me all over the world dancing with The American Ballet Theatre in New York for five years. Simultaneously I was dancing in the Paris Opera with the Bolshoi, with the Mariinsky. And began dreaming bigger

and bigger and bigger and creating my own project, my Cuban company in Havana. And now I'm directing one of the greatest companies of the world, which is the Birmingham Royal Ballet.

And so, yeah, it's incredible how things happened. To me, I think I'm living this amazing fairy tale, I suppose, because everything, the odds was against me to make it this way, to make it this far even. It wasn't supposed to happen. But it did.

Nishi Somaiya: I want to touch on something that you just said. Obviously, as a Black dancer you've set many firsts. The first Black principal dancer in a royal ballet, the first Black person in the UK to win a major ballet company. How do you think about giving back to the industry? I know you focus on diversifying the talent at Birmingham as well.

Carlos Acosta: I think, obviously, giving the same chances that I can. And I created a scheme also through my foundations to try and find the next talent out there in Columbia or the Dominican Republic. Because, you know,

sometimes we tend to live in our own little bubble. But there's a world out there, a world that I'm really interested in as well to reach out.

But I think that the most important thing is how diversity now is on the top of everything that everybody is doing. And that's great to have that kind of sensitivity and concern for others and where they come from, how they think. Is this harmful to them? That consideration and that respect, I think, is a wonderful thing to behold.

I'm not proud of being the very first Black dancer who starred in *Swan Lake* in the Met because I was the first one who did it or anything like that. In fact, you know, this should be a learning for all of us to start thinking and looking wider and broader. Because the truth of the matter is there are many, many talents whose speaking that we are losing. And they might come from the most unexpected places, like I did, from Los Pinos, very, very unexpected.

But I think, obviously, we are in a better position than when I started in the '90s because of that fact. And I think that that's a wonderful thing to see. That directors like

myself, you know, right now, they're trying, or they've been pushing into a direction to really have much more range and give people the chances that they deserve. Ultimately, it's about opportunities. If I didn't have the opportunities of somebody seeing the prince that I can be, then I would have never been able to achieve it.

But yeah, it's a very good position to be with the diversity now, it's something that is pretty much part of our lives today.

Nishi Somaiya: And since January 2020, you've obviously been director of The Birmingham Royal Ballet. We recently opened an office there, as you know. So, we share an affinity for the city. But tell us a little bit more about your work there and your goals for the company.

Carlos Acosta: My goals? I have many. It's very important to, obviously, bring new audiences, so that the composition of the audience changes so that it's from all kinds. There is this stigma attached to classical dance because we were born a long time ago, the classical dance has been around since the 1500s. It's one of the most

ancient that we know. At all costs, it was from the very beginning, meant to be the biggest show in town. So, you've got a bit orchestra. You've got the signage. You've got costumes. You've got all kinds. So, at any given time when you want to see *Swan Lake*, you know that in that ballet there are 300 minds collaborating. So, it's a big, big show. And it's a form and a structure the works.

But obviously, we were born in 1500 and plus. And so, we need to reinvent ourselves in a way that the new generations have that kind of common ground or that can follow it. So, we have to be able to bring new audiences.

And this is a program that we have, many programs that we have, the outreach program. That is very important to really take what we do into schools and try to get the kind of deals, somehow, that allow students to come and see what we do, which is a varied range of programs that go from classical to contemporary. For instance, I am bringing programs with music of Radiohead, which is called *Radio and Juliet*, which is telling the play of *Romeo and Juliet*, but with Radiohead. And things like that. Again, as a package, it's no longer a company that is ingrained into the past.

But it's actually a company that could be also in the present. And how can we possibly go into the future?

So, it's a big challenge right now, obviously. We're going to have to work with the community and form alliances. Very important. Because, obviously, all of this is an exercise that, ultimately, you need resources for. So, it's really, really fantastic momentum to have you guys coming to Birmingham. Hopefully we can do so many things together.

But this is one thing. I wanted the company to be recognized more internationally. I want the best company I can possibly have. I want it to be the best company in the world. And we might not get it, but this is the way that we need to think. And for that, the level of the company, the dancers, needs to raise. And how do you raise the level? Repertory. Bring in ballets. Bring in new idioms. The best choreographers out there to help the dancers to become the best versions of themselves.

Nishi Somaiya: I have no doubt you're going to give every international ballet company a run for their money. I mean, last year was obviously very challenging for the arts,

particularly the pandemic breaking out right as you were being appointed head of the company there. How are you, the staff, the dancers, how did you have to adapt? How are you thinking about the future?

Carlos Acosta: Well, you know, the industry, the artistic industry the most-- imagine. You need a space for us. In order to do what we do, you need space. You need a good floor. And now you're stuck in the kitchen, training in the kitchen via Zoom. Not knowing where this is going to end.

What that does to your mind, the levels of anxiety, not knowing. A lot of people, it caught them in an age that they were trying to make a transition anyway. And so, they probably thought what is the point? I might as well just drop it. And I'm talking about musicians. I'm talking about dancers. A lot of them, because we start their career at 18 when you're a professional, 18 - 19, and we're teenagers. So, they want to be at home. Some of them are from New Zealand. They want to be next to the people that they love. And so, it's just very anxiety for everyone.

And obviously, in the school, the company wasn't hiring

because obviously we had to preserve our finances because we didn't know what the impact was going to be and when we'd be able to be in the theatre and have revenue. And so, it's a very, very tough situation.

The young kids from the school were not allowed to leave to go on auditions. They weren't allowed to train properly. They were losing their conditioning. I mean, it's disastrous. You know?

And so, for Birmingham, we didn't have the structure to keep our followers and our connectivity online. So, we had to hurry up, boost our capabilities to put things on Zoom. To try and see if we could have a live relay and keep active online so that we don't lose our core members. But also, we are in the business of alleviate, to provide people with escapism. So, we had to be able to provide that.

And just not knowing. Not knowing until when. So, it meant that we had to have three plans, A, B, C, and we don't know which one is going to land. At some point I was trying to bring shows to a tennis court or to outdoors, whatever, the library, because obviously we lost the

theatre.

But hopefully from this point on things are looking more positive. And hopefully everything will improve. Yeah. I still haven't lost my enthusiasm.

Nishi Somaiya: Yeah. I think we're up on time. So, Carlos, I think I speak on behalf of everyone when I say it's been a pleasure and an absolute honor to have you here with us today. And I'm certainly very excited to watch you come back on stage in November. So, we're looking forward to that. So, thank you very much.

Carlos Acosta: Thank you, Nishi. Thank you.

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