

Report to Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund (LUTSF) from Stephen Williams. The trip was for two weeks from 2-18 April 2004.

Covering letter:

Dear LUTSF

Please find enclosed the report on my recent trip to Cuba. The duration was for two weeks during the Easter break from the 2nd April to the 18th April 2004.

Originally I had planned to visit the school in January 2004. I had been advised however by Aurora Bosch (a Cuban teacher who makes annual visits to the Central School of Ballet) that the best time would be when the Cuban National School of Ballet hosts a concourse during the Easter period. This gave me a wonderful opportunity not only to see the School and to observe classes, but also to attend the lectures, and see the 8th International Ballet Competition. There was so much going on in a small time frame that my mind is still trying to catch up with what I saw!

I am slowly introducing to the students I am currently teaching the different methods I saw from my observations. My plans are to monitor the way our students respond and to make known the results. The Central School of Ballet runs a series of classes around the country where I teach the ballet section. As well as the students I teach, there are many teachers who attend these classes and this will be a good opportunity to promote the information I have learnt.

Because I think many people in the UK would benefit from attending future International meetings run by the National School of Ballet in Cuba, I will send a copy of my report to the Dancing Times in the hope that it will be published.

As visiting the National Ballet School of Cuba has been something I have wanted to do for a long time, I cannot thank enough the Management Committee of the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund for helping me to realise this ambition.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Williams

MY VISIT TO THE CUBAN NATIONAL SCHOOL OF BALLET.

During my Easter break I had the chance to visit Cuba to have a look at the male training and the travel cost of this project was supported by the Lisa Ullman Travelling Scholarship Fund. My trip coincided with 11th International Meeting of Ballet Academies, and the 8th International competition that took place from the 3rd of April to 17th April 2004. There were representatives from Mexico, Dominican Republic, Columbia, Honduras, Puerto Rico, Peru, Costa Rica, Panama, Venezuela, Canada, Bermuda, Belgium, Portugal, and Great Britain with over 500 people attending the event. Each of the academies

taking part in the concourse was invited to stage a ten-minute piece either choreographed for themselves or a piece of repertoire. The organisers selected the pieces and these were shown over three evenings of dance galas at the National Theatre. Students from the National School of Ballet also took part, dancing pieces from the companies repertoire with some outstanding performances. One of pieces selected came from Mexico with a boy who was nine years old dancing the variation from the Russian version of La Fille Mal Gardée. He was remarkable as he showed a virtuosity, which belied his age and deserved the standing ovation he received. As well as offering the opportunity to observe classes, the school ran a series of lectures on; the Cuban methodology, History of dance, Dancers Injuries, the frustrations facing dancers and how to cope with them, Music Appreciation. All were very interesting and I am very grateful to the school for providing me with a translator.

Alicia Alonso formed the company in 1948 and the school in 1950. At the start the Company had only thirteen Cubans, the rest came from Columbia, but by 1968 the Company was completely Cuban. The Cuban style respects its roots in Latin American folklore but felt it important to find a system to base its syllabus on. The school looked towards Russia and some teachers were sent to Cuba to help set up a course. The syllabus devised by the Russian teacher Azari Plisetsky is based on the Vaganova method but has also borrowed from other systems like the Italian school for fast footwork and batterie. The school also uses the style Alicia Alonso had developed for herself. As a ballerina she had a pure classicism which showed a strength and beauty that was unique at that time. Some of the lines needed to be adapted for the Cuban physique such as the attitude derriere position. We are more used to seeing the foot higher than the knee but for the Cubans the shape is more square with the foot on the same level as the knee or with the foot lower than the knee.

The director of the school Romana de Saa has done wonderful work in getting the government to pay for everything from acquiring a building that has state of the art facilities to meeting the full costs of running the school. The school has only been in their new premises for a couple of years and has twenty studios all sprung, three fitness studios with various machines (running machines, bikes, muscle strengthening equipment), ten physio rooms with every kind of equipment needed for rehabilitation and classrooms for the students academic studies. The main school has 312 students and 110 of those are boys. They also have a fantastic outreach education programme with 4,500 children and 1,500 of those are boys. Children are bussed from all around Havana to the school for after- hours classes. In one of the dance galas I saw a ballet choreographed for the junior school that was over one hour long and had 800 children on the stage. They all clearly enjoyed their work and had the ability to move well. What a fantastic way to educate a future audience as the theatre (which must have seated 2,000 people) was packed with proud families.

The school searches for talent all over the island and once the students are selected they go to a school near to where they live for there is one in every province (each school follows the programme set by the National school of Ballet). Once they reach the fifth grade the students take an entry exam to go to the school in Havana for the final three years of training. Yearly assessments take place and the students who have successfully completed the course receive a six-month apprenticeship with the National Ballet of Cuba and after that may gain a contract.

Dance is taken much more seriously and for the Cubans it is a great privilege to train and have a career in dance. Cuba is a small island, the population is just over 11 million, and yet the country supports not only the National Ballet of Cuba with 100 dancers, but also a company in Camague with around 50 dancers, small contemporary companies and Folklore companies. The people love their roots in the folklore of Latin America and are proud of their culture. Even though ballet is only 55 years old in Cuba there are families where dance has been handed down through the generations. José Manuel Carreno is a guest principal to many companies and has danced with the Royal Ballet, his father was a dancer and in now a teacher, his uncle danced and teaches in America, and his half-brother Joel Carreno is a Principal with the National Ballet of Cuba. In U.K. we still have some way to go in educating our nation that to become a male dancer does not question his identity and that it requires a lot of physical strength, stamina and dedication to train to become a professional dancer. Carlos Acosta became one of today's remarkable dancers through his father. He sent Carlos to the ballet school to instil some discipline in him and for him to learn a useful craft. Whilst he took a while to settle into the school he saw a performance by the company and became totally absorbed and is now the dancer we know and admire today.

One of the characteristics of a Cuban trained dancer is their turning ability. From the lecture on the School's methodology of turning they said that their secret was to start training students from a young age. This way the students get a feel of turning before the fear of turning sets in later on. They feel it is important for the student to get a good sense of turning and then clean up the shape rather than going for the correctness of the movement which could inhibit the turn. In the classes that I observed most of exercises in the centre practice and allegro have some kind of turn. I have heard about how students stand on a piece of wood (that came from the rocker part of a rocking chair) to use to improve spotting. Because you are turning on the flat foot and the wood to gives you a broader based balance, you can get a really good sense of turning without the fear factor. Such a simple idea that really works! One boy I observed did twenty turns. He was able to keep his torso in one piece and really use his head to get the turn. The school still has these pieces of wood but also have an up to date version of the idea of spinning disks that are made in Spain by Salter. They have a website and can be contacted by email on the equipment that they have provided the school. www.salter.es

I found the classes I observed were truly inspiring. Both the school and the company seem to follow a set formula in the ordering of the exercises at the barre. Normally the use of port de bras is at the end of an exercise to stretch out the muscles, but I liked their idea of doing a circular port de bras before a fondu exercise. The debate on the grand plie keeps surfacing now and again on whether it has a value or can it damage the joints. In the Cuban method the plies are combined with the rond de jambe par terre. The previous exercises combine the use of battement tendus with stretches forward, side and back bends and balances on two legs and one leg. The muscles have had a thorough preparation before greater demands are asked for in the body.

My main interest in visiting the National School of Ballet was to have a look at the male training. In the male classes I saw that there was a real sense of movement during exercises at the barre, in the centre. In the centre practice when one group had finished an exercise, instead of just walking away to make room for the next group, with a simple stage gesture they will introduce the next group. The exercises also had more emphasis on theatricality with the introductions having a greater use of port de bras than I have seen before. It was also interesting that here we refer to exercises as enchainments, but in Cuba they refer to exercises as variations and indeed they were more theatrical. For the allegro there were some differences in how steps were executed. Assembles and Jetes to the side had a more energetic throw of the leg with an emphasis on 2nd at 45° and joining the legs when they landed rather than in the air. I have tried this with my present class and it has helped the students gain height and have a better use of the feet. I will continue to use the method of joining the legs in assemble at the height of the jump and for the jete asking for the foot to be in the position of coup de pied at the height of the jump. But I will use both methods as I see a real value to both ways of performing the steps. The physical preparation classes had a lot of emphasis on stretching. A useful exercise to help gain stability in the hips for adage or grand battement is to stand facing a portable barre. Make sure that the barre is adjusted so that the student can put one leg over the barre without too much effort. The leg is supported just behind the knee and student slowly extends the foot away from the body as in a developpé movement. Because the height can be adjusted on most portable barres and the working leg is being supported by the barre, it is easier to control the extension of the working leg. This can also be done side ways to the barre and extend then working leg to 2nd. To help students who have weak backs and cannot hold their arms in 2nd position for long at the barre, get the student to put their working arm across the body and hold the opposite shoulder. Up until now I have asked the student to put their working hand on their hips to help keep control of their backs but only had a reasonable amount of success. The first method not only supports the back but also helps the student to feel if there is any unnecessary tension the chest.

The experience of visiting Cuba, both attending the conferences and watching the competition during the second week, has given me a lot of food for thought. People I talked with were extremely proud of their short history of dance and their desire to retain the original style of the ballets. I saw a performance of Giselle danced by the company from Camague (which is the

same production danced by the National Ballet Company) that looked like Coralli and Perrot had choreographed the ballet yesterday. The Romantic style of Act II just looked like the lithographs seen in books. By saying this the Cubans are not dancing museum ballets, they have a vast range of repertoire covering 19th 20th and 21st century ballet. It was however refreshing to see so many people truly believe in the art of dance and that their contribution to the rest of the world is both exhilarating and unique.

Stephen Williams



