

Beijing Music Festival



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Rise Up and Dance



Carlos Acosta and Javier Torres © Javier Rojas

Juliette Barber speaks to Javier Torres, Managing Director of the Acosta Dance Foundation, as he shares his vision to create a “new Covent Garden for dance” in south east London

Reflecting its diverse and creative population, London is home to an eclectic dance ecosystem, with Covent Garden long considered its beating heart. However, following a recent influx of talented Cuban dancers, a new artistic district is emerging that looks set to shift the balance. Behind this trend sits Javier Torres, the renowned Cuban dancer turned Managing Director of the Acosta Dance Foundation (ADF) and Acosta Dance Centre (ADC) in south east London. Equal parts passion and strategy, Torres envisages the centre as a mecca for Cuban dance in London and hopes to foster a “dancer in every home”.

Arriving at Woolwich Works in south east London, the new home of the ADC, its imposing beauty is difficult to ignore. A former military outpost, the space has retained a certain industrial feel, yet the centre has taken advantage of enormously high ceilings, a wealth of natural light and amazing views of the River Thames to ensure its visitors will remain inspired at every turn. Its architectural prowess is matched by state-of-the-art facilities, with five fully-equipped studios, alongside office space, a kitchen for visiting dancers and immaculate changing facilities, including gender-neutral toilets.

Despite its impressive location and pristine amenities, Torres stressed his egalitarian vision. Keen to distinguish the ADC from the wealth of elitist and expensive dance studios in the capital, the centre has retained the spirit of accessibility that underpins its Cuban counterpart. Alongside dance classes, residencies and rehearsal space for industry professionals, the centre will also offer dance classes at a reduced rate to the local community, hoping to reach 215,000 individuals. ADC’s prospective programmes include: “Rise Up and Dance”, a free educational programme for local schools; Acosta Ballet Camps, intensive training camps for budding young dancers; “Dancing by Your Side”, a mentorship programme for underrepresented freelance dancers and choreographers; the Acosta Advanced Training Hub, a free programme for 10 pre-professionals based on the Cuban ballet tradition; and the Carlos Acosta Choreographic Fellowship.

Woolwich Works will also act as the British base and international headquarters of the Acosta Dance Foundation, a charitable endeavour founded in Cuba in 2011 by celebrated Cuban dancer and current Director of the Birmingham Royal Ballet, Carlos Acosta. The foundation offers dance classes to



Acosta Dance Foundation © Sjoerd Derine

disadvantaged children in Cuba and seeks to transcend borders and cultural boundaries through the transformative power of dance.

Torres' commitment to this vision stems partly from his own formative years; with both parents working in the creative industries he was encouraged to explore a culturally rich career and believes that all young people should have this same opportunity. However, his own artistic journey has not been plain sailing, increasingly concerned about what would follow his final season as a professional ballet dancer and plagued by a perception that "people think dancers are stupid". As a result, Torres coupled his dance career with extensive studies in business management and leadership, completing his MBA during his final years as a professional dancer at Northern Ballet. Seeking advice on the transition from dance to management, Torres even created his own mini-mentorship programme, visiting 14 international arts organisations to speak and spend time with their management teams, including Monica Mason, former Director of the Royal Ballet. It was this diligence and commitment to build a legacy beyond the dance world that propelled Torres into the role of Managing Director of ADF, proving to Carlos Acosta that his onstage talent was matched with considerable business prowess.

With the ADC scheduled to open its doors in September, Torres is aware that the centre will face funding challenges, much like its counterparts across the performing arts sector. Whilst he hopes to secure funding from individual donors, corporates and artistic foundations, Torres is clear that his primary vision is to create a "dancer in every home". Whilst this is certainly ambitious, his enigmatic leadership and true commitment to accessibility might make this prospect closer than you think!

The Acosta Dance Foundation opens on 4 September. To find out more about its professional programmes and community initiatives visit www.acostadancecentre.com



Javier Torres © Emma Kauldhar