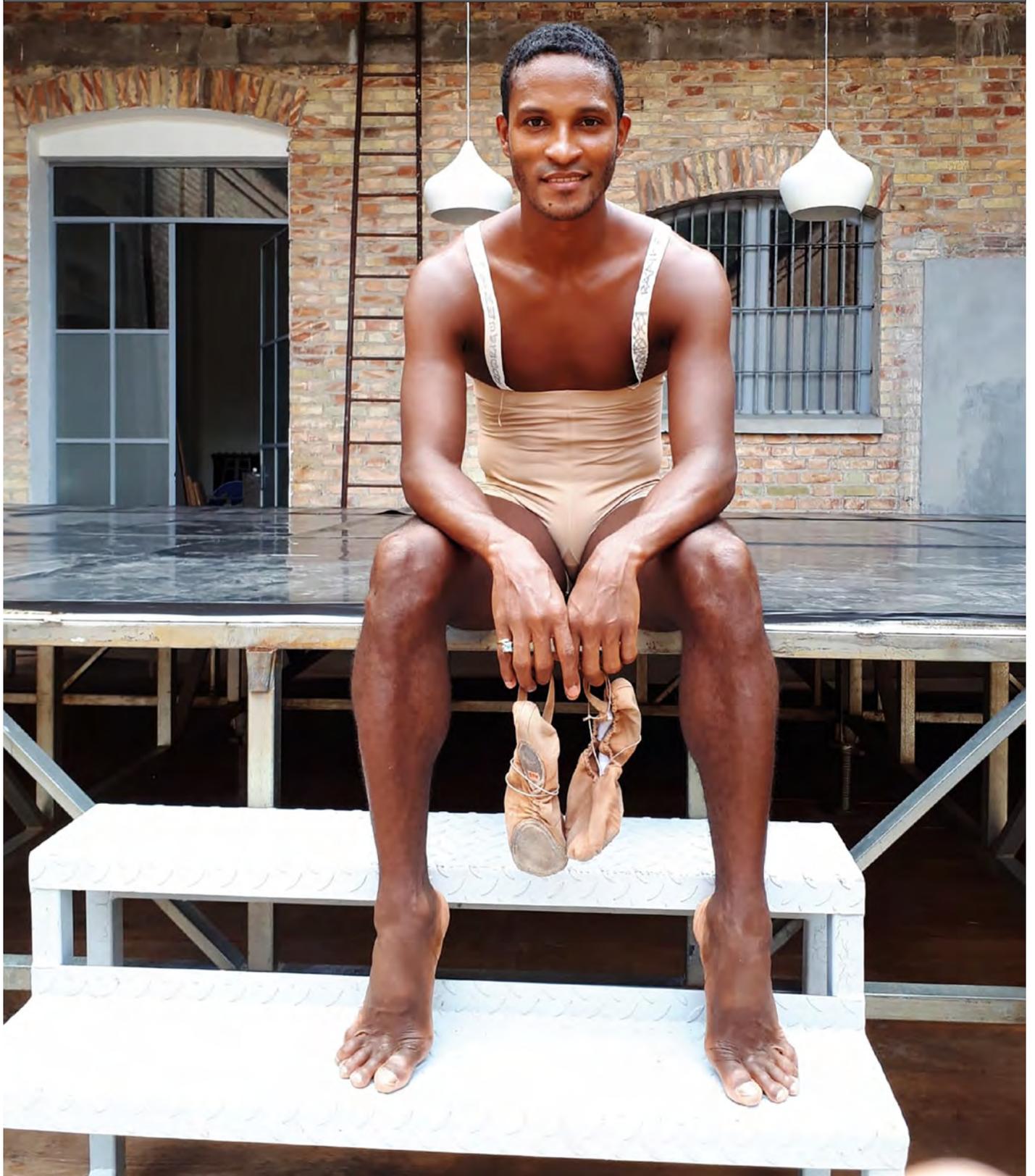


FERNANDO MONTAÑO

An expat's odyssey



“Having time off to him seems to mean packing his schedule more than ever.”



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Like many expats, Fernando Montaña came to the UK for work. Probably unlike many expats though, he was 14 years old and took a route from his home in Colombia to ballet school in Cuba with stops at the world-famous La Scala in Milan and a convent in Turin. Now he's a high-profile soloist with the Royal Ballet in Covent Garden, a charity patron and an activist. As with any truly epic travel tale, it was quite an odyssey for a young man and one that took many twists and turns before he found himself settled and calling London home.

Sitting opposite me relaying the story in a café on a wintry London morning in January, it's hard to imagine the journey he's been on but easy to understand the success he's now enjoying. Montaña is chatty and open and seems to have all the time in the world for a leisurely breakfast.

In fact, it's lucky to catch him in person at all as he's on a sabbatical from the Royal Ballet for the 2018/2019 season and having time off to him seems to mean packing his schedule more than ever. Emails are exchanged for a few months looking for a time to meet or even video call between his many projects around the world before an opportunity opens at short notice.

A day after we meet he's off to Los Angeles where a film about the story of his life is in production and after that Montaña heads to Colombia to dance in the Teatro Colón's opera buffa production of *Barroco Travel*. "It's a new opera, created in Italy, with the music of Vivaldi and others. It's familiar music but a new story," he explains. The work and its tale of immigration couldn't be a timelier theme today, especially for Montaña. "After Colombia, we'll have a recording of the performance

and hope to bring it to other countries," he says of his wish to bring the performance to London.

So how did London come to be home to this rising star of the ballet world? Montaña says he initially wanted to be a footballer but after seeing a ballet performance on TV he was captivated. At 14 he applied to, and was accepted by, the prestigious Cuban National Ballet School in Havana. "It was a very different way of living and even thinking. It was the time of the embargo and there were food shortages. I would find myself waiting for the bus for hours just to get to class," he remembers. The host family he was living with were welcoming initially but while it soon turned difficult, Montaña didn't dare tell his parents "because they would've made me come home and I really didn't want to leave





despite the hardship.”

It was through a new living arrangement with the grandmother of a fellow dancer that he then found himself in Italy. “She’s half Cuban, half Italian and had moved to Italy and told me to join her there for a ballet competition.” Montaña missed out on the competition because it took so long to get his visa but ended up winning a scholarship to study in Turin. That’s where the unusual living arrangement came in – he had no choice but to share his friend’s room in a convent. “There were three of us sharing her flat in the convent. We would sneak out in the morning and in again in the evening.” He lived like this for several months until he was spotted by a scout from the Royal Ballet. Montaña jumped at the chance to audition and almost immediately relocated to London. That was in 2006 and since then he has worked his way up from Artist to First Artist and in 2014, Soloist.

He’s now so settled and comfortable here that Montaña says even when the dancing ends he’ll remain in London. What does he love about life here? “Tea. I love afternoon tea” he laughs, noting that the National Portrait Gallery restaurant with its view over London is his favourite spot for it. “And I love hearing ‘sorry’ when people bump into you.” What does he miss from

home? “I miss fruit! Colombia is the most diverse country with produce. Because of that you have many things that are only available there. I love the smell of a mango that you just don’t get here.”

Speaking of people bumping into you, Montaña remembers how a man stopped him on the street in Covent Garden in 2008 to ask if he was a dancer. It turned out he was working on a project with fashion designer Vivienne Westwood and she asked him to dance in a charity production she was working on. Over the years, he’s modelled for her and the two enjoy a strong friendship to this day

Outside of a career with the Royal Ballet and a side line in modelling, what else is keeping Montaña busy? For a start, he maintains strong links to Colombia as a patron of Children Change Colombia (CCC), a charity that works to alleviate poverty and inequality among children affected by the country’s long civil war. With CCC, he visits projects in his home country and fundraises in London to support their work. He’s also heavily involved as a Counsellor with One Young World, a global non-profit forum for young leaders. But perhaps his most visible charity work will be this June for World Ocean Day with his Dance for the Sea project. The campaign, highlighting the impact of plastic in

the oceans, will launch on June 8 with striking images and video of Montaña dancing underwater. For this campaign, he has once again collaborated with Vivienne Westwood who designed one of the costumes he wears in the project and worked with local school children creating the floating plastic mass under which he dances.

For probably anyone else this would be more than enough to induce multitasking stress. But not Montaña who somehow has found time in between all this to write his autobiography. In fact, the sabbatical he is currently on is his one concession to mere mortal levels of activity. The book has already been published in Spanish with a launch in Colombia and should be hitting British bookshops later in the year. “I was using break time in rehearsals to type it up on my phone so I took a sabbatical. It’s the first time in years that I can plan my day,” he notes. “When you’re in the company you can’t actually plan your day because they could call you to step in at any time. Timetables are theoretical.”

Montaña will be back in action at the Royal Ballet this year, which means he’ll be back at home in London after a packed sabbatical. Like many, he notices the slight limbo the life of a long-time expat can place a person. “In Colombia, sometimes people ask me where I’m from. I might sound different from them now.”

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