



Charles Washington (pictured fourth from right) is in awe of Cesc Gelabert

Bringing it all back home

Perthshire lad Charles Washington is thriving as part of Spain's **Gelabert Azzopardi**. Charlotte Harrison meets him prior to his Scottish debut

Ordinarily, if you're captured on video doing something unusual, the best you can hope for is a nice wee cheque from *You've Been Framed*. Unless you're Charles Washington, of course, in which case you end up with an unconditional offer from one of the world's most esteemed dance schools. Filmed dancing at a local fashion show in his native Aberfeldy, Washington impressed his mother so much, she posted the video off to the Rambert School in London. 'I just improvised and somebody filmed it,' recalls Washington. 'I think my mum was quite surprised at the way I could move, so she sent the video to Rambert without me knowing. They offered me a place and I didn't even have to audition.'

Prior to Rambert, Washington had never taken a dance class in his life. But whatever qualities bought him that highly contested place, worked their magic again six years later. This time, securing him a job with Cesc Gelabert, arguably Spain's most influential choreographer. 'I hadn't heard of Cesc before, but a friend of mine suggested I audition for the company. It wasn't until afterwards that I realised how well known he is. There were 200 other people auditioning, it was all in Spanish and I was the only British person there.'

Despite the language barrier, the 26-year-old found himself one of eight dancers chosen to work with a man who can truly be described as one of a kind. When I meet Washington in the Barcelona headquarters of Gelabert Azzopardi Companyia de Dansa, it's clear he still can't believe his luck. 'Everyday is completely interesting,' says Washington. 'Just watching Cesc dance; his expression is amazing. What he's taught me has completely changed the way I perceive my body, how I use it and how I approach dance.'

The company was last seen at the Edinburgh International Festival in 2004 with the joyful *They Came Watering Flowers*. This August, Gelabert will bring two new works, *Sense Fi* and *Conquassabit*, each blending neoclassical ballet and contemporary dance with something altogether unique. Making full use of brain and body, Gelabert's background in architecture influences his approach to both choreography and staging. He doesn't tell us stories as such, just gives us enough set, props and dynamic movement to make up our own.

At the age of 56, Gelabert remains a compelling force on

stage with his talented dancers surrounding him like acolytes. Ninety minutes of strong technique, diverse music (contemporary composer Pascal Comelade and Handel) and ever-changing choreography pass by, leaving the audience culturally satiated. And while we Brits may need a shoehorn to get us up on our feet, at Barcelona's Teatre Lliure the crowd is quick to show its appreciation for Gelabert's new double-bill.

'I'm not used to standing ovations and people applauding for such a long time,' says Washington, smiling at the memory of the previous evening. 'I stand there on the stage and almost forget where I am, it's a bit dreamy. Cesc has a very strong following and people really do love him. It's not just a dance crowd that comes to see him, it's people who are lovers of the arts.'

Since Gelabert formed the company in 1985 with Lydia Azzopardi, his London-born partner (both onstage and off), he has strived to develop a new way to communicate with the body by retaining a deep respect for what went before while embracing the future.

'Cesc's choreography isn't traditional,' says Washington. 'And we're all younger dancers with modern ideas, which Cesc appreciates and uses. But I think the fact that we take Handel's Baroque music and use another expression on top of it is a juxtaposition that's very appealing.'

Six months after moving to Barcelona, Washington has started to master Spanish, learnt a new way of moving and achieved his ambition to travel the world. Now it's time to bring it all back home. 'It's a big pressure,' says Washington about playing the Festival. 'A lot of my peers from school live in Edinburgh, so I think it's going to be very emotional to step foot back in Scotland and dance professionally for the first time.'



Gelabert Azzopardi Companyia de Dansa,
Festival Theatre, Nicolson Street,
0131 473 2000, 21-23 Aug, 8pm, £10-£28.

**WE'RE ALL
YOUNGER
DANCERS
WITH
MODERN
IDEAS**

The Bank of Scotland Fireworks Concert, community ticket giveaway. This year Bank of Scotland is donating a significant number of Princes Street Gardens tickets to community groups across Edinburgh and the Lothians. To find out more information and for your chance to win tickets, please visit our website www.eif.co.uk/wish-you-were-here. **Sunday 6th September at 9pm.**