



Rafael Valdéz Ramírez

Rafael Valdéz Ramírez at the YAGP finals in New York. Photo: Emma Kauldhar

CARLOS FORCADA speaks to the Colombian winner of the YAGP Dance Europe Award who dreams of becoming a prince

How does it feel to have won the Dance Europe Award for Outstanding Artistry at the YAGP?

I really didn't expect to win the prize - it was a complete surprise. I felt very happy that the hard work I'd done preparing for, and during, the competition had been recognised. But I would have never imagined I'd win an award from *Dance Europe*!

Tell me about participating in this year's YAGP finals. How was the experience?

I had always wanted to participate in this competition. It had been a

to see so much talent from so many places; to get to know new people... It was a great opportunity which I'm very thankful for.

Do you feel it's been helpful in your professional training?

Yes, of course, I feel a door has been opened for me. Through the competition, I was offered a contract with the Junior Company of the Dutch National Ballet, which I'll join in August. I'm very happy for that.

Have you made many friends through the competition?

Yes, and I also saw many people who I have met through the initial rounds or other competitions, and it was great to see them again and to see them onstage.

Was this your first time at the YAGP?

Yes, this was my first time. I competed at the regionals in Chicago, and from there went to the finals in New York.

Were you the only Colombian contestant at the finals?

There was another Colombian boy, who lives in Orlando, but he was representing his American school. I was the only one representing Colombia and the Colombian school, Incolballet, as well as my school here in Kansas. So that makes me doubly proud to have won an award.

What variations did you compete with, and why did you choose them?

I danced *Black Swan* in the second round, and in the first round I did the variation from *Grand Pas Classique*. *Black Swan* has always been one of my favourite variations, and I felt it was a good role for me. I feel very comfortable dancing prince roles, roles with strength, so I chose something I was comfortable with. I felt those two variations were the ones I could take the most advantage from.

How did you prepare them?

I prepared them with my teacher, Juan Pablo Trujillo, who is the director of the school here in Kansas. I had private coaching with him. I had already danced *Black Swan* in Colombia, and taken that variation to other competitions, so I had done it quite a few times before. We started working on them in September, getting ready for the regionals.

Are you looking forward to moving to Europe?

Yes, of course. Dutch National Ballet is one of the best European companies; I've always followed the company and its story. I'm very excited, and proud of myself for having gained this opportunity.

great company and I'd love to work there. I also, obviously, like other companies, like The Royal Ballet.

Which dancers do you look up to?

ABT's David Hallberg and Leonid Sarafanov. I like them for the quality of their dancing, their clean technique - I love to watch clean dancers who really embody the prince roles. That's what I identify myself with the most - the lyrical prince roles.

What was the best thing about participating in YAGP?

The best thing was getting to know new people, new directors, and the opportunities that came from doing so.

And what was the hardest thing?

The hardest thing was the pressure, the nervous atmosphere, the competitive element. I was quite nervous - but you're always going to be, anyway. I haven't really got a technique to get over my nerves; I just try to relax and really focus on myself and what I'm doing, and not about the people around me. And then go out and dance with my heart - I always dedicate my dancing to my family, and that helps.

What advice would you give any future YAGP participants?

I would say go for it, it's a great competition from which you can get many opportunities. Obviously you have to work very hard and push yourself, to obtain what you really want. Don't give up, and always follow your dreams, which is the most important thing.

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