

By ALEXIS ABEJO

# THE RIGHT TO DANCE

**A**T first glance, Enrico Labayen, one-time recipient of the Dancer of the Year Award from the prestigious Beaux Arts Society of New York, could well be the best argument for deschooling society.

He hardly went to school. At a very young age, Labayen discovered that he had no time for academics and so promptly dropped out. Though his main interest lay in the arts, particularly ballet (and the sciences), he managed to get his education by reading voraciously. But he cautions: "When I read something I don't read the obvious. I have this thirst for knowledge that I want to be sated. I'm still curious about a lot of things. There is still a lot that I want to do."

All the choices he had made in his life and career and the lessons learned along the way all conspired to bring forth an individual imbued with a high sense of creativity, originality, a fascination for what's difficult and a critical attitude against all sorts of artifice — whether in art or in life.

As a person and as an artist, Labayen, indeed, is less like anybody else than anybody.

Mind-expanding and deeply personal tendencies are the characteristics that best describe his present artistic temperament. For instance, in *Ligeti Variations*, a solo choreographed

specifically for him by director/choreographer Alonzo King of San Francisco's Lines Dance Company where he was a principal dancer, Labayen did a stunning display of unabashed talent and elemental power through the so-called multi-gravitational technique. He also considers Lucas Hoving's *Icarus*, his first successful piece, a personal favourite.

Smarting under the strains of a very large family (12 brothers and sisters) Labayen went through a very difficult childhood. "At 13 I knew I didn't belong. My family could not understand me." Almost simultaneously, he began to develop his instinct for independence and also started to take responsibility for his own life.

Recalling his first encounter with the world of ballet, first with Tony Elejar and Julie Borromeo and later on with Alice Reyes at the age of 14, Labayen revealed that the urge to don leotards and tights was almost natural. "It's like I was meant to do it. I didn't have to make a choice at all. It was made for me. I tried it once and that was it. I was bitten."

From that point on, everything simply progressed steadily. After

a year of classes, Labayen says that he could already do all the steps there are. He challenged: "Never make that 'He'll never make it' remark because once you do that to me, I'll make it. Once you make all that bet and stuff, I'll make sure I win."

And win he did. Not only in that imagined wager made haphazardly early in his dream career but numerous scholarships to some of America's renowned ballet studios as well as awards and accolades from around the world.

Driven to excel, Labayen admitted that he is very competitive only with himself which according to him is the best competition of all. "I don't look at anybody's backyard. What they have is what they have. And what I have is the only thing I've got. And I work with what I have."

He attended the American Ballet Theatre School in New York, the School of American Ballet, the American Ballet Center and the American Dance Center, all on scholarships.

Labayen has danced with the legendary Alvin Ailey Dance Company where, even as a student, he was a soloist. He has also appeared with the American Ballet Theatre's touring company, the Larry Richardson Dance Company, Eglevsky Ballet, Edward Villela



**Labayen: the compelling countenance of a cerebral dancer.**