

# THE BALTIMORE SUN

**On the Rise: Howard County's young stars in the making**

By: Valerie Bonk | June 3, 2015



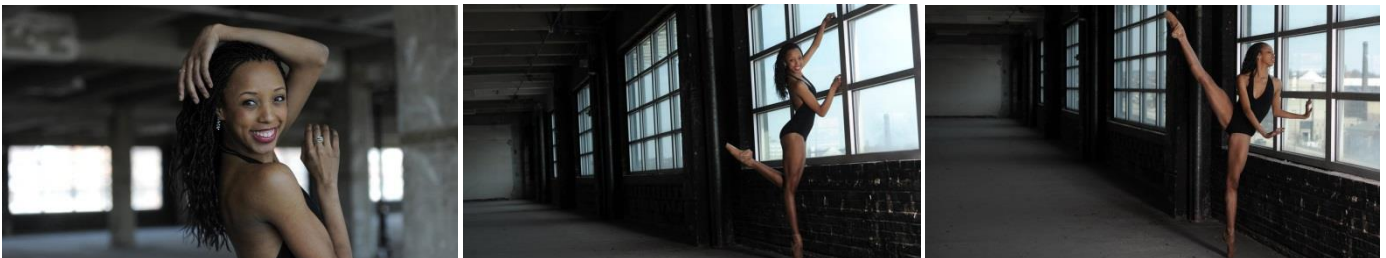
## **Courtney Spears, dancer.**

It all started when she was just 3 years old. Courtney Spears' mother, D'Andrea Sweeting Spears, purchased her first leotard, tights and ballet slippers, and from then on Courtney never turned back.

"She bought them for me because she thought they were cute and that I would enjoy wearing them," says Spears, 20, who grew up in Columbia. "But she said when I saw the outfit, I absolutely lost my mind. I had to put it on that very moment and began twirling around the house."

Her love of dance has never stopped. Her passion for performing has taken Spears from home recitals for her family to the stages of New York City, where she is a junior in the Alvin Ailey Bachelor of Fine Arts program at Fordham University.

Spears had attended Arabesque Dance Studio in Columbia before being accepted into the dance program at the Baltimore School for the Arts, where she underwent extensive training in ballet, modern dance and pointe.



"I never really thought about being a professional dancer, but my ballet teacher, Maureen Wheeler at Arabesque, believed in me," Spears says. "She saw something special and recommended that I audition for the Baltimore School for the Arts."

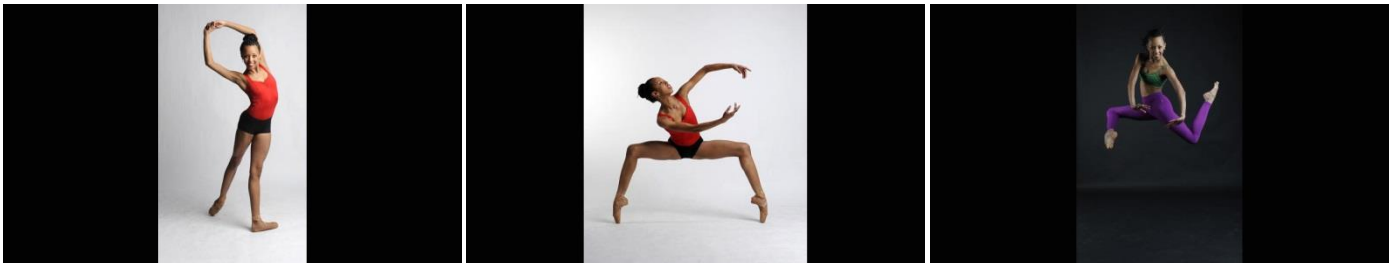
“It is always exciting when you come across a student who you know has the potential to dance professionally, and Courtney was one of those students,” says Wheeler, ballet program director at Arabesque. “She really pushed herself in class and, when given corrections, tried to apply them right away, so she progressed fast.”

Once at college, her passion and talent only grew. As a sophomore in 2014, she was invited to audition for elite dance company Ailey II and was offered an apprenticeship with the company. In April, she moved from apprentice to full-fledged member of the company and will join the company full time in the fall, traveling across the country and abroad. (She’ll still graduate from Fordham in May 2016, thanks to a program that lets students work dance jobs for academic credit.)

“Courtney is a talented and gifted young artist who is highly motivated and committed to dance,” says Melanie Person, co-director of the Ailey School and director of the Ailey BFA program through Fordham University. “She has a love for the art form and the courage that it takes to make it in this profession.”

In New York, Spears has turned heads in the dance world, landing on the cover of Dance Spirit Magazine’s college edition.

Matthew Rushing, rehearsal director and guest artist for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, recognized Spears’ gift immediately.



“The first time we met was at an audition I held for a piece called ‘Uptown,’” Rushing says. “I had recently set this piece on the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and I now had a chance to set it on the students of the Ailey School. Courtney showed up and knocked my socks off.”

Spears hopes to not only have a career performing as a professional dancer but also to use her passion to give back to those abroad.

“I would love to start a foundation or program that caters to helping young children pursue their dreams in the arts, here in the U.S. and also in the Caribbean. My mother is from the Bahamas, and I feel a deep connection to Caribbean culture and values,” she says. “I was fortunate enough to be placed around people who guided me to where I am today, and one day, I dream of becoming that bridge for other kids to reach their dreams.”

### **Sola Fadiran, vocalist and actor**

When he took the stage to perform “Make Them Hear You” from the musical “Ragtime” at the 2015 Rising Stars Competition in March, Sola Fadiran’s high school drama teacher was in awe.

“As soon as you hear his magnificent voice, it just draws you in,” says Sue Miller, the theater director at Glenelg High School.

Fadiran, 18, topped the competition to take home the \$5,000 scholarship prize at the Howard County Arts Council’s annual event to recognize emerging performing artists in the area.

“Winning the Rising Star Competition was a great source of validation and encouragement for me,” Fadiran says. “I don’t think it means anything about my talent compared to my peers. ... I feel honored and blessed to have been part of that experience.”

Sola Fadiran of Glenelg is the winner of this year's Rising Stars competition. Here, he sings at the home of Mary and Earl Armiger during a private fundraiser for the Columbia Center for Theatrical Arts.

Fadiran, who is a 2014 graduate of Glenelg, performed in productions both at school and at Toby’s Dinner Theatre in Columbia before starting college in August at the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music in the Bachelor of Music program in vocal performance.

He trained for more than two years with soprano Alina Kozinska of the Peabody Institute at the Johns Hopkins University, refining his vocal skills and expanding his repertoire.

“Working with Sola has been sheer pleasure because of his openness, hard work, humility and tremendous talent,” Kozinska says. “Once he becomes a well-rounded musician with a command for the repertoire, his options will be unlimited.”

Fadiran has big plans for his future, including a career in live theater, screen acting and film acting.

“In five years, I hope to be working as an actor, perhaps in New York City,” he says.

And those close to him don’t doubt that if he keeps up the hard work and fuels his passion for the arts, his success will continue.

“He has a gift that is unusual,” Miller says. “He’s a very young man with the sound and look of a much older person.”

Ross Rawlings, the director of choral activities and piano at Glenelg High School and musical director for a production of “Aida” where Fadiran was a performer, says his voice will get him far in the business.

“His vocal maturity is and has always been far more advanced than most in his age range,” Rawlings says. “His light and positive personality makes him immediately inviting and personable to all those around him.”

### **Amanda Yuan, musical theater actress**

Amanda Yuan started as a shy young girl whose preschool teacher suggested that her parents sign her up for some extracurricular activities to help her come out of her shell.

Now 16, Yuan is far from shy. The River Hill High School junior, Clarksville resident and daughter of two engineers is storming into the performing arts scene. She grabbed the leading role of Peter Pan in the school’s production of the classic when she was just a sophomore.

“I got to fly, which was extremely exciting,” Yuan says. “I had never really played such an integral character like that before, so it was definitely hard but so rewarding.”

This year, Yuan was cast in the role of Gabriella in River Hill’s production of “High School Musical.”

Amanda Yuan, 16, a River Hill High School junior, has multiple television appearances, including a solo in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, under her belt. She's also been cast in leading roles for school productions like "High School Musical" and "Peter Pan."

She started her training at the Drama Learning Center and the Columbia Center for Theatrical Arts to gain experience performing in shows, recitals and competitions. As she got older, she started taking voice lessons and attending workshops in New York City to enhance her skills as a musical theater performer.

"We realized Amanda liked the stage ever since preschool," says her mother, Lucy Liu. "I remember at her brother Morgan's middle school graduation ceremony, when students were called to stage to receive their diplomas, Amanda kept asking when it is her turn, and kept trying to get onto the stage," she says. "When finally the ceremony was over, she dashed and climbed onto the stage, dancing and singing all by herself. She takes every chance to take the stage and always treats it very seriously."

But it's not just the stage where Yuan shows off her talents; she's also been on national television, appearing on "Sesame Street" at age 9 and during the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade finale at 11 with the students of Stagedoor Manor, a performing arts training center.

"Originally, the director only gave me one solo line, the second line of 'Santa Claus Is Coming to Town,' but upon entering the recording studio, the producer just decided to let me to open the song and close the first verse, which was so exciting and surprising to me."

But it's her "Sesame Street" appearance that people are still talking about. It was a tough audition, Yuan says.

"They asked me to define vocabulary words, and I was on a roll," she says. "The shoot was probably one of the best filming experience I've ever had, though. I got to run around the Bronx Zoo and eat all this amazing food. It didn't even feel like a job."

When she got home, her teacher showed the clips to her class, and the snippets on YouTube still come up among her friends. "Sometimes kids bring them up again just to mess with me," she says.

Jen Rudin, a New York City casting director and author, says she's had her eye on Yuan for several years.

"I've auditioned thousands of children, and she's that kind of stand-out performer that's extremely hard to find," Rudin says.

Yuan credits her ability to reach for her dreams to her parents, who immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1980s.

"They've worked hard and built a beautiful life here from nothing, so when I think something's tough for me, I remind myself of my parents," Yuan says. "Because my parents were able to sacrifice everything and work so hard to pursue their dream, I am inspired every day to work just as hard to pursue mine."