

9-year-old Portland ballerina leaps onto world stage



If the suspense was killing Leanne Van der Hilst, she didn't show it. On a recent Thursday night, with her final scores in the Youth America Grand Prix competition in New York due to arrive by mail, she and her fellow Level 3 students watched calmly as their teacher at Beaverton's Sultanov Russian Ballet Academy demonstrated a combination.

Like the others, Leanne was dressed in a blue leotard, pink tights and ballet flats. At 4 and a half feet tall, she is a tiny force of nature, blessed with the physical attributes of a successful dancer: long limbs, enviable flexibility, an expressive face and stamina. A fourth-grader at The International School in Southwest Portland

and a ballet student since age 5, she trains five days per week, dances in two academy shows annually and takes private lessons.

What makes her even more remarkable, said Cynthia Sultanov, co-owner of the studio, is a focus and maturity beyond her years: "She takes classes with older girls and holds her own. You can almost throw anything at her and she understands it and absorbs it."

The studio's artistic director, Artur Sultanov, a former Oregon Ballet Theatre principal dancer, concurred: Leanne demonstrated talent from an early age. But "to go to New York at this age — it's a lot of pressure."

This year, Leanne was among seven academy students who competed at the Youth America Grand Prix's Seattle semifinals in January. Every year, thousands of young dancers enter the semifinals, but only a couple hundred make it to New York, where finals are held, and jobs and scholarships follow.

In Seattle, three Sultanov students placed in the top 12 in their age brackets. Leanne made it to Manhattan in April. As the third youngest dancer in her bracket, she competed with top students from Asia, Europe and South America, dancing the classic "Fairy Doll" solo.



The competition is a good kind of push, said Cynthia Sultanov. "Kids are very motivated when there's a chance to perform. They're motivated to get better, and they do get better. And they have a goal to meet, which is to place."

By Heather Wisner

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