

Present and future stars will align at Ballet West for youth competition

By Kathy Adams Special to The Tribune

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The Sugar Plum Fairy played by Beckanne Sisk takes the stage as cast members of Ballet West, of Salt Lake City, Utah work through a dress rehearsal for their performance of *The Nutcracker* at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC., Wednesday, December 10, 2014. (Photo Rod Lamkey Jr.)

Stars of the international ballet world — and those of the future — will be dancing in Salt Lake City next weekend as Ballet West hosts semifinal auditions for Youth American Grand Prix, the largest ballet scholarship competition in the world for dancers ages 9-19.

The weekend includes a one-night celebratory gala, "Night of Shining Stars," a tribute to former Ballet West artistic director Bruce Marks, and an open-to-the-public viewing of YAGP's semifinal scholarship audition.

This is the first time in its 15-year history that YAGP has held auditions in Salt Lake City and in conjunction with a professional ballet company. Hundreds of dance students from across the Intermountain West will participate in this audition that will culminate in the YAGP finals in April in New York City.

In the past, Utah dancers have traveled to other states to take part in YAGP and have consistently earned scholarships and placements in companies and at universities. Several current Ballet West company members were even "discovered" at YAGP.

Ballet West artistic director Adam Sklute, an adjudicator with YAGP, says he hasn't always been a big supporter of competition dance, but makes the distinction between dancing for trophies and YAGP as an organization that promotes "dance education and awards scholarships to support all dance at every level."

Ballet West principal ballerina Beckanne Sisk is an example of how YAGP brings dancers, teachers and artistic directors together. Sisk began taking dance as a child at a small studio in her hometown in Longview, Texas. In the summers she attended Philadelphia's The Rock School, where her teachers encouraged her to compete at YAGP. Sklute said he [noticed Sisk](#) at a YAGP competition when she was only 15 and was impressed with her line, turning ability and stage presence.

Saturday, Sisk will perform the sensuous, neoclassical pas de deux "Light Rain," with Joffrey Ballet company dancer Fabrice Calmels. The Saturday night gala features an international roster of stars and an eclectic repertoire of classical, ballroom and contemporary modern work. Another of the seven pieces will be danced by Utah native and former Boston Ballet principal Whitney Jensen. Ballet West soloist Chase O'Connell and Jensen will perform the dramatic "Black Swan" pas de deux.

Sklute said the weekend "has the feel of a dance festival," from the chance to observe scholarship auditions to seven of his dancers' guest appearances with the Utah Symphony to the gala honoring Marks.

"Bruce has been a mentor to me and now that he is retired he has been working tirelessly with YAGP," Sklute said. "I can't think of a better opportunity to honor him than with a weekend of dance and dance education."