

ENTERTAINMENT

V&T dancers take 'Unusual' approach to competition

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Since 2001, over 50,000 dance students ages 9-19 have participated in Youth America Grand Prix, the world's largest dance scholarship competition. The talent comes from all over the world in hopes of scoring high enough at the regional rounds of competition to move on to the finals in New York City. The judges see

thousands of dances in more than 20 different cities worldwide, which has many asking the the question, "How do you stand out?"

For 22 students at V&T, Victor and Tatiana Kasatsky's Classical Ballet & Dance Academy in Laguna Hills, the answer could come in the form of an ensemble piece inspired by a Turkish folk dance. "With a piece like this, you either hate it or you love it," said **Lawrence Chen**, 18. "But it gives us a chance to make a statement." V&T's large group piece, "Unusual Proportions" by choreographer **Viktor Uygan**, turns what one typically expects to find at the competition completely on its head as dancers fill the stage dressed in costumes that cover their entire bodies, including their faces and heads.

Even more striking though, are the exaggerated facial features stitched onto the front of the costumes and the costumes' shape. Headdresses span from the top of the students' heads to under their armpits, and necklines begin at the students' waists. "Unusual Proportions" is entered in the category for contemporary choreography, but in a competition full of clean lines and strong classical ballet technique, this novelty item is sure to make an impression on those who see it performed.

The piece, which may look familiar to anyone who has been around the competition over the past decade, originally premiered during the 2008 season of the Grand Prix. "When I first told Victor (Kasatsky) I want to do this piece, I said to him, 'We might be kicked out the first day, but if they keep us, we will win,'" said Uygan.

And his prediction was correct. When the Kasatskys took “Unusual Proportions” to the Grand Prix competition for the first time, it placed first in the ensemble category at the finals in New York City, and Uygan received a special award for choreography. This year, an updated version featuring all new costumes will be presented. “I would say it’s a little intimidating to do something that has been done before, and not just done, but done really well,” said **Bailey Howe**, 16. “We have to live up to the standards of what it was.”

To complicate matters, the piece’s choreography calls for skills not covered in the students’ daily technique classes. With no use of their arms or eyesight, the dancers must rely on muscle memory to hit their formations and maintain their balance. “The first version of the costume let us see at least a little bit through the head scarf, but now we have thicker fabric and we basically can’t see anything,” said **Ysabella Calderon**, 15. “We bump into each other a little bit sometimes and that’s really our only way of knowing that we might be off.”

Uygan, who describes “Unusual Proportions” as adding “versatility on top of classical technique,” said working within the limitations of the costumes was not so much a challenge for him, as the choreographer, as it was for the dancers. “In a professional setting, it’s a dancer’s problem to make the choreography work,” said Uygan. “These dancers are students, so we want to make them look good, but doing something out of the usual is good practice.”

When the dancers from V&T perform at the Skirball Center for the Performing Arts in New York City next month, they will join an elite class of next-generation dance professionals. Along with “Unusual Proportions,” several V&T students will perform solos and duets for a chance to receive scholarships and invitations to study with professional ballet companies all over the world. The pressure of the competition itself, coupled with performing with no arm mobility or eyesight, definitely provides a real reason to be nervous, say V&T students, but Uygan said he believes the stress can be used to the dancers’ advantage.

“All these things make the adrenaline go higher and make the dance better,” said Uygan. “What’s even more important is that these students are bringing more youth to be interested in dance.”

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