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West Windsor Teen Wins Top Scholarship From American Ballet Theatre School



A PRESTIGIOUS PRIZE: Max Azaro and his mother, Kathy Azaro, attended the opening of American Ballet Theatre at New York's Metropolitan Opera House. As part of the festivities, Max was presented with the coveted Northern Trust Scholarship. *(Photo Courtesy of ABT Jackie Kennedy Onassis School)*

Max Azaro was already studying gymnastics when he first took his place at the ballet barre at Princeton Dance and Theater Studio in Forrestal Village. For the energetic 10-year-old, there was something about this different way of movement that grabbed his attention. He has never looked back.

"Max is one of the 'hungriest' students I have ever had," said Risa Kaplowitz, director of the school and its affiliated Princeton Youth Ballet. "He really wanted to be a professional ballet dancer from a young age."

Seven years and two full scholarships to American Ballet Theatre's Jackie Kennedy Onassis School later, the West Windsor teenager is clearly on his way. At the gala opening of the ballet company's spring season May 16 at New York's Metropolitan Opera House, Max was presented with the coveted Northern Trust Scholarship — an honor reserved for just one student.

"It's sort of special, because the directors choose a student from the whole school, and this year it's me," Max said a few hours before attending the gala with his mother, Kathy Azaro. "Aside from a full ride, one of the 'perks' is that I get to go to the gala tonight and attend the pre-show reception, the show, and the after-party dinner, which is when they present the award. And the honorary chair is Michelle Obama."

Despite his busy schedule of classes at the JKO School in Lower Manhattan, Max made time to come home and take on the role of the Prince in Ms. Kaplowitz's production of *Cinderella*, on May 14 and 15 at the Princeton High School Performing Art Center. Dancing opposite Princeton Youth Ballet's Abby Jorgenson, he was a gallant partner and performed his solos with calm assurance.

Max credits Ms. Kaplowitz with recognizing his talent and giving him a strong foundation from a young age. "She practically taught me everything I know about ballet, and she gave me so many

opportunities to perform,” he said. “And with her connections, she has helped me with getting scholarships to ABT.”

Students at the JKO School share studios with ABT and sometimes perform with the professional dancers. “We get to be ‘supers’ [supernumeraries, taking extra character roles] in different shows,” Max said. “The kids at the school get first dibs on these roles. And also, last year we performed our own piece by [Alexei] Ratmansky in the fall gala.”

Like many ballet students on track for a career, Max studies at the Professional Children’s School, where he will be a senior next fall. He lives with his grandparents in Short Hills to make the commute easier. Studying at ABT’s school has been “an amazing experience,” he said. “I get to learn from so many great teachers. Franco de Vita, my director, is retiring this year. He has been a mentor for me over the past few years. I’m in the second highest level this year, but he has let me take classes at the highest level as well.”

Max dances, he said, “because I love moving. I’m a person who needs to move. I did gymnastics first, but once I started dancing I liked it more. There is always room to improve. It’s never perfect. Ballet has very classical roots in history, but I love the way contemporary works are reinvigorating the art form.”

A particular favorite of Max’s is ABT’s resident choreographer Ratmansky, whose trilogy of works to music by Shostakovich has been winning rave reviews. “I have developed a great fondness for classical music,” Max said. “*Romeo and Juliet* is one of my favorite ballets because of the score by Prokofiev. I also love Shostakovich and Ratmansky does ballets to his music. I love listening to that music and dancing to it.”

Over the years, Ms. Kaplowitz has entered Max in ballet competitions. “When I was coaching him for Youth America Grand Prix in 2014, I really had doubts about whether he would be ready in time,” she said. “But he worked super hard and his growth during those months was phenomenal — so much so that he came in at second place during the regional competition and was offered a scholarship to JKO during the national competition. And now, to get this incredible award from JKO and Northern Trust is just amazing. Max just needs an open door, and then he will always run to fulfill his potential.”

Despite his dedication, Max’s hopes for the future are not limited to ballet — or a possible career with American Ballet Theatre. “I love ABT, but I think my goal is, in a year or two, to go to a company in Europe, where I can dance and travel,” he said. “After that, I’ll go to college and do something else. I’m not sure what.”

Written by: [Anne Levin](#)