

Youth America Grand Prix: NY Finals; Stars of Today & Tomorrow

The annual young bunhead parade moved from Lincoln Center's David H. Koch Theatre to the Brooklyn Academy of Music this year, so the average Manhattanite may not have noticed that the Youth America Grand Prix, 2016 edition, returned to New York last week. But anyone familiar with ballet certainly would have known, and made the pilgrimage as I did, to see the YAGP Final Round, and its annual Stars of Today Meet the Stars of Tomorrow gala program. Despite some flaws, which are built into a procedure that emphasizes ballet's future, missing these programs was unthinkable. Even though it's at least nominally a competition, it's also great fun to watch. The first thing that hits you as you watch the Final Round of competition (limited to solo competitors in the Junior and Senior Women and Men categories) is how talented, and how poised, these young dancers are. In the first half of the program in particular, which featured the Junior dancers, they all looked like they owned the stage: no one looked scared, and as far as I noticed, no one missed a step.

The second thing that hits you is how young these young dancers really are. Having these 12 through 14 year old competitors categorized as Junior Women and Junior Men is a fact of politically correct life, and one certainly not limited to dance competition categories. You forget, when they perform, how young they really are. But seeing these young dancers emerge giddy and bubbling from their dressing areas following the first half of the competition is totally incompatible with seeing what they can do on stage. They don't yet have the affectations common to professional dancers – no aura of physical superiority; no sense, yet, of being gods or goddesses. On stage, they look like the budding professional dancers they are: larger than life; serious; motivated; driven. Off stage, they act, and look, their age – except they drink water and snack on fruit. The third thing that hits you is how impossible it would seem to be for the judges to decide the “winners” from among them. On my personal scorecard, I realized early on that I'd given most of these Junior level dancers '8's or '9s' on a '1-10' scale. I was more discerning with the Senior level dancers – my scorescribble showed a few '7s'. I'm easy.

The 2016 YAGP New York Finals began on April 22 at NYU's Skirball Center with a rigorous five-day schedule of competition and classes during which the finalists, culled from 'semi-finals' competitions at various venues around the world, were evaluated not only for awards, but also for scholarships to major ballet school or invitations to summer intensive programs, culminating in the “Final Round” on April 27, the gala on April 28, and another gala, which included awards announcements, on April 29. The notion of “winners,” though of obvious significance to those who win, is not what's critical here. I'm not a great fan of ballet competitions, but as I've emphasized in previous reports, it seems clear to me that the purpose of YAGP is less to anoint award winners than to provide an avenue for young dancers to be introduced to administrators and teachers from major ballet companies and schools from around the world, and vice versa, enabling connections that might otherwise never be made. Founded by Larissa and Gennadi Saveliev (a former soloist with American Ballet Theatre), YAGP trumpets not just its award winners, but the scope of the process and the eventual professional success of its participants, award winners or not.

The connections made among the contestants themselves is equally compelling. These are young dancers who speak different languages and come from different cultures. The competition, quite obviously from the applause and cheers that the dancers in the audience gave to the all the finalists (the boys are a different category – they're rock stars) provides a sense of comradery that might temper the sting of later cut-throat competition they might have to endure. It's a mini United Nations of dance – one that apparently works. The second night of the three-night gala was YAGP's annual “Stars of America Meet the Stars of Tomorrow” program. This year's procedure was somewhat different from those I recall from prior years – the competition 'winners' had not yet been announced, so those young dancers who participated did not necessarily represent those who had been awarded medals or scholarships, and there were fewer of them during that portion of the performance than there had been in the past. That being said, it wasn't too great a logical leap to assume – correctly as it turned out – that most of those who performed would be officially recognized during the next day's Awards Ceremony and performance (which I was unable to attend).

Also different in quality was the 'Stars of Today' segment. To put it bluntly, while several of these professional dancers are doubtless 'stars' on a certain level, or deserve to be, this year's program did not include scheduled dancers with the same reputation, at least in the U.S., or the same anticipatory buzz, as the professional dancers in years past. In that sense, this part of the gala was more akin to 'stars of tomorrow meet the stars of the day after tomorrow.' Be that as it may, there were some superb performances, as well as examples of last minute heroics by New York City Ballet's Daniel Ulbricht, and American Ballet Theatre's Sarah Lane, who both filled in on late notice and with limited, if any, rehearsal time.

The Final Round

Reviewing the performances of each of the finalist dancers during Wednesday's Final Round would be inappropriate. But not mentioning those whose performances I found particularly compelling also seems unfair – even if only to me. So, keeping in mind that these competitors had already passed muster in semi-final rounds and in finals competitions earlier in the week, and that awards and scholarships were not just based on these soloists' performances in the Final Round, but also include their separately-evaluated performances in contemporary pieces, below is a listing of the performances during the "Final Round" that were particularly impressive to me. Those who actually won awards will be listed at the end.

Of the 30 Junior Women Final Round competitors, from the first (12 year old Jolie Rose Lombardo, from the USA, dancing a variation from *Paquita*) to the last (13 year old Brianda Bustamonte, from Mexico, a variation from *La Fille Mal Gardee*), they all danced superbly. But if I failed to also mention 12 year olds Rafaela Pandolphi's (from Brazil) pixieish variation from *Harlequinade* or Ashley Lew's (from the USA) accomplished variation from *La Fille Mal Gardee*, 13 year olds Penelope Birnbaum's whistle-clean variation from *Paquita* and Kotomi Yamada's exciting rendition of a variation from *La Esmeralda*, and 14 year old Lilly Maskery's mastery of the variation from *Grand Pas Classique* (respectively from the USA, Japan, and New Zealand), I'd never forgive myself. The 12 finalist Junior Men, to my eye, were led by the first three performances – 12 year olds Francisco Gomes (peasant variation from *Giselle*), Antonio Casalinho (variation from *Le Corsaire*), both from Portugal, and Itsuku Masuda (variation from *La Bayadere*) from Japan.

Among the Senior Women and Men (ages 15 through 18), there was a marked increased appreciation for the significance of the competition and their performances than was apparent in the younger dancers. While they all danced well, I noticed several minor errors and attempts to overdo things. But there were a few standouts, at least to me. Among the 26 Senior Women: 15 year old Kenedy Kallis danced a memorable Nikiya variation from *La Bayadere*, 16 year old Yu Hang, a thrilling variation from *La Esmeralda*, and 18 year old Yuka Iwai, a sparkling variation from *Coppelia* (from the USA, the People Republic of China, and the USA respectively). Among the Senior Men, I was particularly impressed by 17 year olds Narcisco Alejandro Medina Arias (achieving incredible elevation in his variation from *Don Quixote*) and Jun Joonhyuk (variation from *La Bayadere*, delivered smooth as silk), from Cuba and the United Kingdom/Republic of Korea respectively.

Stars of Today Meet the Stars of Tomorrow

YAGP's Stars of Today Meet the Stars of Tomorrow galas have always – at least for as long as I've been attending them – focused less on warhorses and more on more innovative dances or classical pieces not frequently seen, which may not be as impressive as the more familiar pieces but that address where ballet might be going rather than where it's been. To a large extent, this was true this year as well.

After opening with an 'overture' (Paganini's *Capriccio No. 5*) by Elizabeth Aoki, a young violinist who appeared on a YAGP gala program two years ago, accompanied by a film that described in brief snippets the entire YAGP process, both at and apart from the competition, the competitors were given their opportunity to shine.

Those competitors who danced in the program's first half included Masuda, dancing a contemporary piece titled *Havanolo*, Amit Hason and Romi Yellen, two 16 year olds (*pending confirmation*) from the Unison Dance School in Israel (a school that fosters cooperation between Israeli Jews and Arabs), dancing *Max*, a piece by Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin, Castalinho, repeating his remarkable variation from *Le Corsaire*, Thays Golz & Guilherme Maciel of Brazil, performing a contemporary piece titled *Shelter*, Yu Hang repeating her exciting variation from *La Esmeralda*, Vincenzo De Prima, an 18 year old from Austria, dancing *Shadows of Red*, his own very fine piece of choreography, Arias, repeating his variation from *Don Quixote*, Kallas dancing a contemporary piece, obviously created for her, choreographed by Garrett Smith, called *Kallas with a K*, and Joonhyuk Jun repeating his stellar performance in a variation from *La Bayadere*.

The 'stars of today' half of the program was followed by a film tribute to Shelley King, a member of YAGP's administration who passed away last year. At its conclusion, her daughter Rebecca King, of the Finnish National Ballet, and NYCB's Amar Ramasar, danced the New York premiere of Peter Quanz's duet, *Blushing*. It's a lovely piece, impressively and beautifully performed by both dancers, and an appropriate tribute to a woman I didn't know, but who apparently everyone in else in the dance world did, and who apparently everyone in the dance world loved.

The section concluded with the annual *Grand Defile*, choreographed by Carlos dos Santos, Jr. (*pending confirmation*) This dance, featuring over 200 YAGP participants, seems to get better, and more miraculous, each year. The piece is prepared during the week-long finals, squeezed in between the young dancers' competition performances and classes, and all component parts are apparently assembled at the last minute. That it works as well as it always does is not only a tribute to the dancers themselves and the patience and skill of dos Santos and his rehearsal associates, but also to the YAGP concept — these people largely did not know each other prior to the New York finals, come from different cultural backgrounds, and speak different languages. It's a sublime celebration of unity among differences, and of ballet as a universal language.

The Stars of Tomorrow segment did not get off to a good start. *Invocation*, a world premiere choreographed by Josie Walsh, is the kind of piece that makes my skin crawl, because lots of people think that's where ballet is, or should be going. If that's where it's going, ballet may well be, as others have said, in trouble. Walsh specializes in edgy, fusion dances, and this dance, to music by Hanz Zimmer and James Newton Howard, fits that mold. Both Zimmer and Howard are Hollywood composers of considerable renown, best known perhaps, for their collaboration on the score of certain Batman films (e.g., *The Dark Knight*). I don't know whether the music used here is from one of their collaborations, or derived from independent compositions, but its Hollywood super-hero roots show.

Essentially, Walsh seems to be making an attempt to fuse ballet with testosterone-driven muscle dance, but the fusion is only skin deep, as the lone ballet dancer has already been converted to the dark side when the piece begins, and her ballet moves look like visual daggers. With its ponderous, dark atmosphere (music, costumes, lighting, and choreography), *Invocation* looks like a heavy metal music video that attempts to add a little class to the usual aggressiveness, or a piece that might appear on *Dancing With the Stars* during a program dedicated to superheroes. Here, a ballerina, Stella Abrera of ABT, is 'supported' by six men, collectively described as "Freestyle Artists." There is what appears to be a ballet barre running vertically center stage, which is used more as a stationary divider of sorts, as well as a rack on which Abrera is occasionally spread. From the outset, Abrera looked tough as nails in an oversized wig/hat (which she removed soon after piece began — though not soon enough), but also thoroughly discontented, if not horrified, to be doing what she was doing. This may have reflected the appearance she was obligated to assume in context (a lean, mean, dark, badass ballerina superhero; or maybe the boys' vicious den mother), or her true feelings about being mired in this piece.

Michela DePrince and Edo Wijnen, both dancers with the Dutch National Ballet, proceeded next, and quickly brought some light back to the program. Dancing George Balanchine's *Tarantella*, the two were abundantly capable and their enthusiasm was contagious. Wijnen, making his New York professional debut, executed his role quite well, and DePrince, more compact than NYCB dancers I've seen in the role and somewhat tentative at the outset, quickly loosened up and delivered the energy, sparkle, and sassiness that her role requires.

Every Stars of Today program seems to have a male angst-driven contemporary dance solo. This year, Daniel Camargo, a principal dancer with the Stuttgart Ballet (and also making his New York professional debut), presented the U.S. premiere of *Firebreather*, choreographed by Katarzyna Kozielska. Based on the brief biography provided, Camargo, a relatively tall, finely chiseled dancer, has a comfort level with muscular power displays, both those that are somewhat restrained, as was the case with this piece, or later in the evening, during his solos in the *Diana and Acteon* pas de deux. *Firebreather*, however, is not much more than a series of poses punctuated by occasional airborne flight.

Hannah O'Neill and Hugo Marchand, both from the Paris Opera Ballet (and both making their NY professional debuts), followed. O'Neill, only 23, has had a meteoric rise since winning the YAGP gold medal in 2010, and it's easy to see why. She has a solid technique, as well as a sweetly serene presence – it looks like she'd be a perfect Giselle. But the Pas de Deux from *La Esmeralda* was not the best of choices for them. She looked unsteady, particularly when being partnered, but also somewhat underwhelming in her solo variation. More significantly, there are different ways to execute the solo (more restrained and classical; or more vivacious and bravura technical displays). I've seen it done both ways. But in this competition, many young women in the competitors dance this solo, and they all approach it in a way that makes it much more exciting to watch. O'Neill's performance suffered by comparison.

If you watch *America's Got Talent*, you doubtless have previously seen Rachel Kivlighan and Nick Mishoe's *Blue Shadow*, one of brightest lights in the programs recent seasons. The piece is a sweetly whimsical merger of projected film and dance, superbly and seamlessly assembled, and Ms. Kivlighan, who is now with Orlando Ballet II, is a lovely dancer. But the BAM stage seemed to gobble it up – though it has lost none of its imagination and creativity, it looked much more pleasingly intimate on the small screen.

Pierre Lacotte's *Marco Spada* is Big Ballet. Recently resurrected by the Bolshoi Ballet (with David Hallberg as the male lead at its premiere), the piece as a whole has not yet been performed live in New York. Consequently, even the opportunity to see a pas de deux from *Marco Spada* live was something to look forward to. But this pas de deux, performed by the Bolshoi Ballet's Ekaterina Krysanova and Artem Ovcharenko, looked both overstuffed and lightweight at the same time. The bewigged dancers looked as starched as they were supposed to look, and danced the pas de deux well, but out of context it just looks a time traveled relic. Ovcharenko, nevertheless, looked particularly polished throughout.

And then came the replacements. It seems that every year, dancers initially scheduled to appear do not, and are replaced at the last minute. This was the case with the Pas de Deux from *Manon*, to have been danced by Melissa Hamilton and Xander Parish, both YAGP veterans. Reportedly, Parish suffered a last minute injury, so instead of securing a replacement (which might have been impossible), Ulbricht substituted with a solo – *Piazzolla Tango*, choreographed by Servy Gallardo. Ulbricht, whom I once described as a combination bowling ball and soaring eagle in flight, delivered his usual stellar performance.

But Lane, who replaced the previously announced Gillian Murphy in the *Diana and Acteon* pas de deux on short notice as well, had a tougher road to hoe. It's one thing to dance a solo, but a duet requires coordination with a partner, and insufficient rehearsal time can prove disastrous – or at the very least induce understandable and distracting concern. Add to that that Lane had not previously danced with Camargo, and had performed the *Diana and Acteon* pas de deux

professionally only once before, for YAGP (I checked – the only record I found was from a 2006 gala, with Joseph Philips), and the situation becomes all the more perilous. Consequently, that both of them got through it without error or injury (I noticed some partnering glitches, but under the circumstances, that's not a surprise) is not only commendable, but quite remarkable.

And Lane only a few days earlier had been a late substitution in the Dancers Against Cancer gala in New York, partnered by....Ulbricht. The fact that these last minute heroics were not memorialized in a program insert or pre-performance announcement is regrettable – the audience didn't learn of these substitutions until screen shots introducing the next performance on the program were flashed on the stage screen. Be that as it may, what Ulbricht and Lane did represents the kind of selflessness, as opposed to all too common self-promotion and aggrandizement, that should be recognized and encouraged. And it's appropriate that it happened here – it also is emblematic of the goals and attitude that YAGP fosters among its participants.

Award Winners

The following is a list of top finalists and award winners (including in categories that were not presented during the "Final Round"). A complete list is available on the YAGP web site.

Ensembles:

Third Place – Cosmos, Kaneta Kouno Ballet Academy, Japan; Second Place – Russian Dervish, LuCiA Ballet Dance Studio, Japan; First Place – Silencio, Bale do Teatro Escola Basileu Franca, Brazil.

Pre-Competitive:

Men: Third Place – Darrion Sellman, USA; Second Place – Kenzo Seah Jia You, Singapore; First Place – Brady Farrar, USA

Women: Third Place – Isabella Kulmer, Spain; Second Place – Martina Miro, Spain; First Place – Kaylee Quinn, USA.

Hope Award (equivalent of Grand Prix for Pre-Competitive) – Madison Penney, USA

Pas de Deux Contemporary:

Third Place – Within, Maggie Chadbourne (16) and Boris Caballos (18), USA

Second Place – The Path, Sophia Lucia (13) and William Jackson Beckham (16)

First Place – Otho Nu, Paula Rosa Santana (17) and Vinicius dos Santos Lima (18)

Pas de Deux Classical:

Third Place – Pas de Deux from Don Quixote, Juliette Bosco (14) and August Atahu Generlli (18)

Second Place – Pas de Deux from Satanella, Bianca Gomes Vilarinho Teixeira (18), Stanislaw Wegrzyn (17)

First Place – Pas de Deux from Giselle, Gloria Benaglia (18) and Andrii Ishchuk (17)

Junior

Men:

Third Place (tie) – Yago Guerra, Brazil and Sheung-Yin Chan, Hong Kong, China.

Second Place (tie) – Samuel Gest, USA and David Perez, Mexico

First Place – Itsuku Masuda, Japan

Women:

Third Place (tie) – Kotomi Yamada, Japan and Brigid Walker, USA

Second Place – Eri Shibata, Japan

First Place – Ashley Lew, USA

Junior Grand Prix – Antonio Casalinho, Portugal

Seniors:

Men:

Third Place – Mitomi Kiyota, Japan

Second Place – Stanislaw Wegrzyn, Germany/Poland

First Place – Narcisco Alejandro Medina Arias, Mexico

Women:

Third Place – Makenzie Henson, Australia

Second Place – Thays Golz, Brazil

First Place – Yu Hang, Peoples Republic of China

Senior Grand Prix – Joonhyuk Jun, United Kingdom/Republic of Korea

Shelley King Award for Excellence – Jolie Rose Lombardo

Natalia Makarova Award – Kenedy Kallis

Grishko Award – Avery Gay

The Mary Day Artistry Award – Julia Rose Sherrill, Vincenzo di Primo

Outstanding Artistry Award – Rafael Valdez Ramirez

Outstanding Choreographer Award – Garrett Smith, Travis Wall, Guilherme Maciel

— by Jerry Hochman

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