

Highlights of YAGP Galas

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Brooklyn Mack and Iana Salenko in the pas de trois from Le Corsaire. Photo Siggul/Visual Arts Masters.

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Youth American Grand Prix, the largest youth competition for ballet in the world, has always stressed artistry as well as technique in its galas. For its blockbuster 15th anniversary two-night celebration, students in the house screamed equally for fabulous jumps and turns as for the poetry of classicism. Another hallmark of these galas, as organized by artistic director Larissa Saveliev, is that they pair together top dancers from different companies—New York City Ballet’s Ashley Bouder with the Bolshoi’s Semyon Chudin, or Ballet West’s Beckanne Sisk with the Joffrey’s Fabrice Calmels. This year each performance was introduced by the dancers themselves talking on camera in candid, brief (yay, brief!) snippets.

Both nights started with charming youngsters—musicians and then dancers—and moved on to world-class professionals. What a sweep!

Here are my very subjective highlights of the professional dancers and choreographers in the two galas. (I have not included the solo competitors who performed, as that would be even more subjective since I was a judge in three of the 20 or so cities.)

First gala night, “Stars of Today Meet the Stars of Tomorrow”:

- The choreographic wonder called *Legion* featured 23 bare-chested young men (ages 13 to 23) from Escuela Superior Musica y Danza de Monterrey in Mexico. Choreographer Jaime Sierra made them into a human mountain for various dancers to scale and later fly off of.
- Then came the Grand Defilé, choreographed each year by Carlos dos Santos, Jr, a genius at handling massive numbers of students onstage. He knows just when to bring in the tiniest competitors and how to leave space for those with special jumping or turning skills to shine. A well-crafted delight, this defilé put the good-natured discipline of more than 300 children to work.
- The Bolshoi’s Olga Smirnova and the Stuttgart’s Evan McKie seared our hearts in the final pas de deux from Cranko’s *Onegin*. As two people desperately facing a passion fated never to be consummated, they were both fiercely emotional. The ending left us just as torn as Tatiana about sending Onegin away.



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Olga Smirnova and Evan McKie in the final pas de deux from Onegin. Photo Siggul/Visual Arts Masters.

- Wearing a spectacular gold lamé outfit, Misty Copeland was sizzling yet classy in *Ameska*, choreographed by Derek Hough of "Dancing With the Stars." She did a mean salsa on pointe and sliced the air with her fabulous legs while shuttling between three guys. Pure seductive fun. This was a YAGP commission and Hough must've been thrilled to have a real dance star to choreograph on.
- The pure, tendrilly classicism of Lucia Lacarra as Odette in the White Swan pas de deux sent the audience into prolonged, thunderous applause. Partnered by Marlon Dino, also of Bavarian State Ballet, her lucid delicate plastique—no jumps or turns—reminded us that classicism can touch us with its sheer beauty.



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Lucia Lacarra and Marlon Dino in the White Swan pas de deux. Photo Siggul/Visual Arts Masters.

Second gala, "15th Anniversary Closing Night Celebration":

- **Maria Kochetkova** of SFB and Joaquin De Luz of NYCB performed a new work called *Kübler Ross* (a YAGP commission), based on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of accepting death. The choreographer, Nederlands Dans Theater's Andrea Schermoly, challenged them with complex movement and a poetic series of filmed images by Zack Bennett with Kevin Schlanser, ending in a field of flowers. Kochetkova and De Luz are terrific together.
- Ashley Boudier, usually such a powerhouse, challenged herself to float like a sylph in the pas de deux from Bournonville's *La Sylphide*, partnered by the Bolshoi's Semyon Chudin. **Bolshoi artistic director Sergei Filin** coached the pair.
- The main duet from *Light Rain* was given a tantalizing performance by Ballet West's Beckanne Sisk and the Joffrey's Fabrice Calmels, taking us back to a sex-drugs-and-percussion haze of the '60s as envisioned by Gerald Arpino in 1981. The complete *Light Rain* was a big hit for the Joffrey in the '80s but it seems to have fallen out of favor. I say, let *Light Rain* reign again!



Beckanne Sisk and Fabrice Calmels in the pas de deux from *Light Rain*. Photo Siggul/Visual Arts Masters.

- Daniel Ulbricht had his moment in Justin Peck's new *Distractions*, where he powers through twisty jumps and turns at top speed. What a thrill to see Ulbricht thus challenged! As for the rest of this new quartet, another YAGP commission, it struck me that the wittiest and most disarming part of Peck's pieces are when the dancers suddenly lie down.
- One can only take Marco Goetze in small doses, and I really thought this audience would not go for his idiosyncratic, obsessive choreography. But his *OnVelvet*, a solo with sharp, choppy hand gestures danced by Evan McKie, won great applause. Like nothing else on the program, it seemed to depict one's inner robot spinning out of control.
- Olga Smirnova brought true grandeur to "Diamonds" from *Jewels*. As partnered by Semyon Chudin (both are from the Bolshoi), she had the weighted leisure and slight whiff of romance to make you savor Balanchine's choreography and Tchaikovsky's music.
- Brooklyn Mack, known for his stupendous leaps, danced the *Gopak* solo that Gennadi Saveliev, a co-founder of YAGP, has performed at many galas. As Mack admitted on screen, "Gennadi killed it" in years gone by. With a bit less precision and fewer spectacular "360" corkscrewing jump/turns, he killed it too.
- Partnered by Brooklyn Mack and Joseph Gatti, Berlin State Opera's Iana Salenko floored us with her terrifically centered fouettés—am I imagining that every third one was a triple?—in the pas de trois from *Corsaire*. I think the most immediate screams of the whole night were set off by Gatti's finishing a multiple pirouette with a slow arabesque—and then somehow finding the momentum to turn some more. Whoa!



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Joseph Gatti and Iana Salenko in the pas de trois from Le Corsaire. Photo Siggul/Visual Arts Masters.