

An Inclusive Site for Dancers and Dance Audiences

■ BALLET (USA & CANADA), MODERN/CONTEMPORARY DANCE (USA & CANADA), REVIEWS

Youth America Grand Prix Galas

David H. Koch Theater; New York, NY

Thursday April 10, 2014: Stars of Today Meet the Stars of Tomorrow

Friday April 11, 2014: Fifteenth Anniversary Celebration

Jerry Hochman

The annual gala that follows the Youth America Grand Prix competition, 'Stars of Today Meet the Stars of Tomorrow', is not your 'usual' gala. It's neither a preview of a company's upcoming season, nor an assortment of ballet's most popular bravura bonbons performed by the greatest dancers. Rather, and in addition to featuring young 'stars of tomorrow' from the competition, it's a compendium of star dancers that New York audiences don't usually get to see, excerpts from classic ballets and contemporary dances, and a smattering of new pieces receiving their world, or New York, premieres that reflect YAGP's nurturing of dancers on both the performing and choreographing level. And as it sometimes does, this year there was a second gala, similarly curated, to celebrate YAGP's fifteenth anniversary.

Some criticism can be made that this year's galas (particularly the 15th Anniversary Gala) were overstuffed with mediocre pieces that could easily have been jettisoned or replaced by more familiar and justifiably renowned dances. This would not necessarily have been an improvement. I found both events to be particularly noteworthy in terms of the variety of the dances and excerpts presented; and the wide-ranging background, company affiliation, and current rank of the performers. While not all the performances or new pieces were successful (indeed, many were disappointing), both evenings maintained interest throughout, and the audiences were receptive and enthusiastic.

Nevertheless, I have one general criticism: YAGP's failure to advise changes from dancers listed in the program. There were three that I was aware of only because I knew the dancers, or those they replaced, by sight: No paper insert was included in the program, and no vocal announcement was made – either of which could have been easily done. Things happen, and cast or program changes are inevitable. But these dancers (and any other substitutes I did not recognize) deserved to be highlighted and acknowledged, and the audience deserved to know who they were seeing.

The programs included two new dances of more than passing significance.

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The most unexpectedly smashing performance was Thursday's presentation of a competition ensemble piece called "Legion", choreographed by Jaime Sierra and danced by 23 young and not so young men (aged 13-23, but mostly 18) from the Escuela Superior de Music y Danza de Monterrey, Mexico. In general, I'm not a fan of all-male ensemble dances, particularly those that emphasize 'masculine' strength and power, but "Legion" is considerably more than that, and it was memorably performed. The dance is exhilarating and lighthearted, daring and ingenious, and it should make its way into mainstream repertory quickly. And it 'only' won second place in YAGP's ensemble competition.

Of the debut offerings, American Ballet Theatre principal Justin Peck's New York premiere of "Distractions" on Friday was the most accomplished. For a quartet of four dancers – himself, New York City Ballet principals Daniel Ulbricht and Jared Angle (a late replacement for Robert Fairchild), and NYCB soloist, Taylor Stanley – it's a short, abstract piece filled with energy, variety and choreographic finesse. "Distractions" is a respite from more 'meaningful' and less successful pieces. It has no airs; there's nothing to 'figure out' – it's simply fine choreography and dancing, and pure fun.

Each gala opened with sterling performances by young student musicians (noted as part of YAGP's aptly-named "Music Protégé Series") which served as appropriate fanfare for the dancing to come. On Thursday, Elizabeth Aoki, a Juilliard student who appeared to be approximately 12 years old (and whose violin looked almost as big as she was) delivered a splendid rendition of Nathan Milstein's devilish "Paganiniana". On Friday, another Juilliard student of about the same age, Nadia Azzi, made her piano keys dance to Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee".

Following the musical introductions, both programs began with representative performances by competition 'winners'. Aside from "Legion", the "Stars of Tomorrow" portion of Thursday's program began with the pas de trois from "Fairy Doll" by three dancers in the 'pre-competitive' age group whose performance was recognized as one of the top 12 in the 'ensemble' category – Antonio Gameiro Casalinho, Laura Matos Viola, and Francisco Tiago Gomes. All were from Portugal; all were 10 years old, and each was awesomely cute. They were followed by Junior Women's gold medalist Aviva Gelfer-Mundl (USA, age 12) who added a delightful ethereal quality to her technically facility in her solo from "Paquita"; and Youth Grand Prix Winner Harrison Lee (Australia, 14), who brought youthful enthusiasm and energy to his variation from "Flames of Paris".

Friday's anniversary celebration began with a performance of "Noir et Blanc", the bronze medal winner in the ensemble category, by 12 dancers aged 15-22, mostly 16, from Pennsylvania's The Rock School. It's a ballet requiring accuracy, fluidity, and technical prowess. Juliet Doherty (16), a student at the San Francisco Ballet School and Senior Women's gold medalist, followed with a finely executed performance of a variation from "Grand Pas Classique"; and Cesar Corrales (17), Senior Grand Prix winner, brought the house down with his hyper-charged variation from "Don Quixote".

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The 'Stars of Tomorrow' portion of Thursday's gala concluded with the annual "Grand Défilé" by all the YAGP 2014 New York Finalists. This is no mere 'parade of dancers'. The choreographer, Carlos dos Santos, Jr., not only created a dance for a the 300 or so dancers, but one that was thrilling, interesting to watch and that appropriately showcased one or another group of dancers and a couple of unidentified individual standouts. Even though one could see that it was a largely a collection of disparate ingredients pasted together (a necessity given the competition schedule), it was by far the best of such pièces d'occasion I've seen over the past three years. Kudos not only for Mr. dos Santos, but also for rehearsal directors Alexei Moskalenko and Mikhail Tchoupakov, as well as for the young dancers who learned and executed their parts so quickly and so well.

Thursday's dancing began with New York City Ballet principals Sara Mearns and Tyler Angle performing the pas de deux from Jerome Robbins's "In G Major". Excerpted from the larger piece, the dance loses its beachy context. But, so isolated, the pas de deux itself becomes more emotionally intimate and visually stirring. It was executed superbly and, to me, this was one of Ms. Mearns's finest performances. As of this date, the composition performance has not been announced. This pas de deux, with this cast, would be a fine addition to NYCB's forthcoming spring gala.

Most of the dances in each program were preceded by filmed comments by one or more dancers, the choreographer, the composer, or some combination thereof. In the clip that preceded the excerpt from "Pas de Duke" that began the 'Stars of Today' part of Thursday's program, ABT principal Daniil Simkin lucidly explained how Alvin Ailey's work differed from ballet, and begged the audience's indulgence if he didn't get it right. On Thursday, Linda Celeste Sims' (replacing Alicia Graf Mack), performance had appropriate weight, but Mr. Simkin moved like a tethered helium balloon. But when the same cast repeated the dance, this time in its entirety, at Friday's gala, Mr. Simkin appeared to grow into the technique as he danced, and by the end, got it right.

"Being Natasha", Gemma Bond's world premiere piece, is an abstract dance with no emotional gloss that I could sense, nor any connection to anyone or anything named 'Natasha'. And although it's put together well, with a variety of choreographic components, images that start interestingly don't go anywhere or fit together. I've enjoyed Ms. Bond's previous efforts, but despite its stellar cast of ABT dancers, this one misfired.

Young Bolshoi Ballet leading soloist Olga Smirnova, who already has acquired an international reputation, followed on Thursday in the climactic pas de deux from John Cranko's "Onegin". This is one of those rare pas de deux excerpts that is so emotionally and choreographically rich that it can stand on its own for more than just bravura dancing. I found Ms. Smirnova to be a compelling actress, while Stuttgart Ballet and National Ballet of Canada principal dancer Evan McKie (in his New York debut) impressed as a solid partner. However, irreverent as it may sound to some, I thought that the performances in the same role by Hee Seo for ABT to be every bit as emotionally compelling, if not more so.

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At Friday's gala, Ms. Smirnova danced the pas de deux from George Balanchine's "Diamonds" (this time partnered by Bolshoi principal Semyon Chudin). Here again, she danced superbly. But her performance was emotionally one-dimensional and, though appropriately regal, was somewhat stoic. Another facet of "Jewels" followed later on Friday, with NYCB soloist Lauren Lovette, who was anything but stoic, and ABT principal Herman Cornejo, dancing the central pas de deux from "Rubies". But even Ms. Lovette's knock-out vivacity was insufficient to offset Mr. Cornejo's unfamiliarity with the jazzy choreographic nuances and precision partnering that the piece requires.

Thursday's program continued with a fine execution of an angst-ridden solo from Rudolph Nureyev's "Manfred" by Paris Opera Ballet étoile Mathias Heymann, followed by the world premiere of "Ameska" by 'Dancing With the Stars' non-star star Derek Hough, performed by ABT Soloist Misty Copeland and 'ballroom guest artists' Paul Barris, Alexander Demkin, and Roman Kutskyv. I would have preferred to see Mr. Hough try his hand at more balletic movement, but for what it was, it was very good. The three men handled the choreography, as well as their ballroom ballerina, crisply, and Ms. Copeland appeared to relish the freedom that the more explosive movement quality and intricate manipulation provided.

Mr. Hough's ballroom showpiece was followed by a showpiece of classical ballet: the White Swan pas de deux from "Swan Lake". Lucia Lacarra has been around the block for many years, but her body still looks remarkably fluid, and her Odette included the most successfully executed 'swan arms' I've seen since Nina Ananiashvili. But to me, she was a bit too mannered and austere. And as exquisite as they were, she continued flapping her swan arms even when she was being lifted over her partner's head. It may have been intended to give the illusion of a bird in flight, even though she was held aloft by her partner, Marlon Dino (like Ms. Lacarra, a principal with the Bavarian State Ballet), but to me it was overkill. On the other hand, during the mini-scene when Siegfried kneels downstage and Odette approaches him from behind, Ms. Lacarra gently but clearly nudged Mr. Dino's shoulder with her arm, or wing, to bring him out of his solo meditation and continue dancing with her. I've never seen this gesture done this way before, and it's a superbly appropriate physical (rather than emotive) image of simple human affection.

On Friday, Ms. Lacarra and Mr. Dino beautifully performed a more contemporary and delightfully simple and serene piece: Ben Stevenson's "Three Preludes", to music by Sergei Rachmaninoff. The same evening, they also danced Russell Maliphant's "Two Times Two", a piece that has the two dancers moving independently within independent beams of light as if in their own private moonlight. An interesting concept, but easily forgettable.

Not easily forgettable was "Millennium Skiva", a pas de deux for humanoids on skis created by Moses Pendleton for MOMIX, which followed the White Swan pas on Thursday. Two dancers, Nicole Loizides and Steven Ezra, appear center stage glued to their skis, which become an extension of their liquid bones: the bodies with their skis moving in ways that they were never intended to. The piece looks like a mating ritual for deboned skiers from Alfa Centauri.

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Mr. Pendleton was also represented on Friday by another MOMIX piece, "TUU" (named after the band that created the accompanying music). This time Mr. Ezra's partner was Rebecca Rasmussen. The dancers initially appear as one body, with she wrapped around his upper torso. They eventually spread into different poses all around the same visual theme – essentially, Mr. Ezra as the center of gravity, with the two bodies assuming poses in which they balance each other in incredibly tortuous-looking positions. Another exercise in strength, balance and body manipulation, "TUU" is characteristic of Mr. Pendleton's choreography for MOMIX (here the program indicates he had co-choreographers Tim Acito and Solveig Olsen), but seeing it once is sufficient.

After "Three Preludes" on Friday, Maria Kochetkova and Joaquin De Luz, principal dancers with the San Francisco Ballet and NYCB respectively, danced the world premiere of "Kubler Ross", choreographed by Andrea Schermoly to music by Antonio Vivaldi. In the introductory film clip, it's described as illustrating five stages of grief. Although I could not discern five discrete 'stages', the dance visually displayed frustration, agony and angst more than adequately. I found the film projected at the rear of the stage to be annoyingly distracting and cryptic, but the performances themselves were as flawless as the piece was uninteresting to watch.

Mr. McKie, partnered again by Ms. Smirnova, followed with the world premiere of his own piece, "Wiegenlied Pas de Deux". Danced to a Richard Strauss lullaby, it's charming and filled with obvious reverence, and it was performed with exceptional warmth, but it's more romantic than it should be for a piece that he says is dedicated to his mother and to all mothers. Later on Friday, Mr. McKie danced "OnVelvet", a solo by Maco Goecke to music by Edward Elgar. Although the audience was clearly enthralled by his ability to move his arms from one angled pose to another at warp speed while standing still or lying on the stage floor, I found the piece to be of little interest or significance.

NYCB principal Ashley Bouder and Mr. Chudin followed Mr. McKie's pas de deux on Friday, dancing a pas de deux from "La Sylphide". For a first attempt, Ms. Bouder did well. Mr. Chudin, more experienced in his role, was understandably more accomplished. Although he wouldn't be mistaken for a Royal Danish Ballet danseur more proficient in the Bournonville style, he brought an enthusiastic and commanding presence to his role – even though he largely ignored Ms. Bouder. The performance brought to mind how long it's been since New York audiences have seen either "La Sylphide" (its return to ABT's repertoire is long overdue), or Balanchine's "Scotch Symphony", which has been absent from NYCB's repertoire even longer.

The pas de deux from Gerald Arpino's "Light Rain" followed, which, out of context, looked like a relic from another age. It was skillfully performed by Beckanne Sisk, a soloist with Ballet West, an elegant and extraordinarily fluid dancer, and Fabrice Calmels of the Joffrey Ballet, a gentle-looking giant who manipulated Ms. Sisk like a pretzel. Later in that program, Brooklyn Mack, a dancer with The Washington Ballet, delivered a jubilant performance of "Gopak", a brief solo piece derived from a Ukrainian folk dance, choreographed by Rastislav Zakharov. It's a high-flying audience-pleaser, filled with aerial acrobatics that Mr. Mack's energized execution took to a higher level. Literally.

If you're going to do bravura dancing and tricks (which were largely absent from the evenings' offerings), it might as well be in the final pieces in the gala programs, and in each of these performances the dancers pulled out all the stops, to the audiences' delight. Thursday evening ended with a rousing rendition of the "Don Quixote" pas de deux, danced by Iana Salenko (Berlin State Ballet) and Joseph Gatti (unaffiliated, but deemed a 'principal dancer'). On Friday, they were joined by Mr. Mack in the pas de trois from "Le Corsaire" to conclude that program. Ms. Salenko is an accomplished spinner, but to me Mr. Gatti in both performances, as well as Mr. Mack, brought more class and personality to their roles.

Aside from the comment about cast changes noted earlier, my only criticism of both galas is that the presenters might want to consider that, at times, less is more. But putting together a week of competition and two galas that span dance styles and dancing generations is no small accomplishment. They can be forgiven for getting carried away.