

The Star-Ledger

The Youth America Grand Prix gives young dancers and aspiring choreographers a boost



By [Robert Johnson/The Star-Ledger](#)

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The competition just keeps getting tougher. Each year, more young ballet dancers enter the **Youth America Grand Prix** to compete for cash and scholarships.

Larissa Saveliev, who founded YAGP with her husband and fellow dancer, Gennadi Saveliev, 15 years ago, says 1,000 hopeful entrants competed in their first season. This year, she says nearly 7,000 dancers from age 9 to 19 participated in elimination rounds held across the United States, in Europe, and in South America and Asia.

The public can attend the final round tomorrow, when the top scorers will vie for coveted places at institutions such as La Scala Ballet Academy in Milan, the John Cranko School in Stuttgart and American Ballet Theatre's Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School in New York. On Thursday and Friday, competition alumni will mix with international stars in two galas that will also feature premieres by aspiring choreographers.

"Brazil is booming!" Saveliev exclaims. "Oh, my God. Booming!" Next season, she says, the YAGP may add Australia to its list of competition sites.

Unfortunately, while the number of competitors increases and schools try to award more scholarships, jobs for dancers aren't keeping pace. In the United States especially, anemic arts funding is strangling the ballet's potential for growth.



Bolshoi dancers Semyon Chudin and Olga Smirnova in "Diamonds"

Marc Haegeman

Youth America Grand Prix

Where: David H Koch Theater at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, 63rd Street and Columbus Avenue, New York

When: Tomorrow through Friday at 7 p.m.

How much: \$45 tomorrow, \$45 to \$150 Thursday and Friday; call (212) 496-0600 or visit davidhkochtheater.com.

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YAGP alumni tend to do well. According to Saveliev, American Ballet Theatre currently has more than 30 of them on its roster. Yet inevitably many of these young artists are simply training to become audience members.

The galas offer newcomers a glamorous platform, where they can share the stage with stars from around the world. And while ballet classics set the standard for judging during the competition, the galas are more adventurous. Lucia Lacarra will be featured in the White Swan Pas de Deux from "Swan Lake," and Joseph Gatti and Iana Salenko will perform razzle-dazzle excerpts from "Don Quixote" and "Le Corsaire."

Yet Saveliev says that in programming the galas she looks for unconventional casting, and tries to encourage creativity. Thus Bolshoi dancers Olga Smirnova and Semyon Chudin will not be seen in "Spartacus" or "Spring Waters" but in Diamonds from George Balanchine's "Jewels," while Ashley Boudier departs from her typical New York City Ballet repertoire to dance with Chudin in "La Sylphide."

The premieres include "Being Natasha," a vehicle for YAGP alumni choreographed by ABT corps dancer Gemma Bond, with experimental costuming and projections by designer Ralph Rucci; "Kübler Ross," a pas de deux for Maria Kochetkova and Joaquín De Luz choreographed by South African dancer Andrea Schermoly; and "Wiegenlied Pas de Deux," in which Smirnova and Stuttgart Ballet's Evan McKie interact with video projections.

In addition to having choreographed "Wiegenlied," McKie will make his New York debut as the dance soloist in another premiere, "On Velvet," by Marco Goecke. In "Ameska," a premiere choreographed by TV personality Derek Hough of "Dancing With the Stars," ABT's Misty Copeland will be partnered by a trio of ballroom smoothies.

Saveliev admits that commissioning new works is always risky. "But," she says, "if we're not going to give them opportunities, who will?"