

New York finalist Nika Afonina. Photo: Emma Kauldhar

## EMMA KAULDHAR reports from New York

**S**o do we really need ballet competitions? Well, probably not in that the world would doubtless continue to revolve without them, but as a means of providing a global platform to assess, compare and nurture the training of the next generation of dancers, then their existence is beneficial. And whilst competitions in the distant past tended to focus primarily on the shameless accumulation of medals and trophies, the fashion has changed. A leader in this field has unquestionably been the Youth America Grand Prix. Founded 17 years ago by Larissa and Gennadi Saveliev, the YAGP concerns itself far more with the development of young dancers' careers than merely

acknowledging talent with prizes.

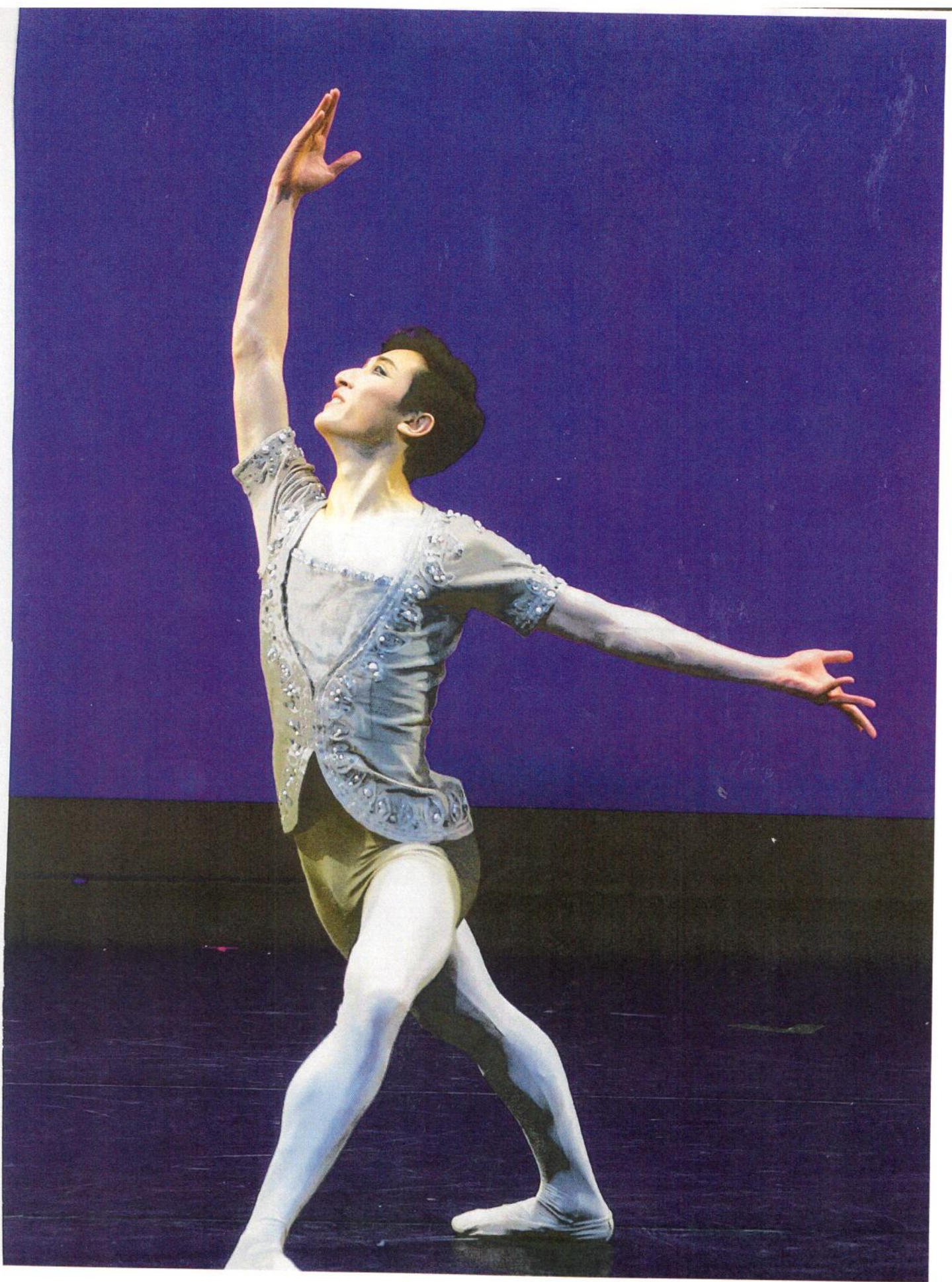
Scholarships are at its core, ranging from those offering full-time training for a year to others that enable dancers to participate in summer schools or other short-term courses - commendably, scholarships worth over US\$300,000 are awarded annually. That schools around the world constantly seek to attract the most promising students means that the YAGP has managed to draw up an impressive list of leading schools keen to participate, comprising 13 from outside and 16 within the US. Additionally, contracts for some junior companies are also offered.

Following semi-finals across North and South America as well as in Europe and Asia, the YAGP year culminates with the finals in











# THE WINNERS

**Grand Prix:** Joonhyuk Jun  
*The Royal Ballet School, UK*

## Senior Women

**1st Place:** Yu Hang  
*Shanghai Dance School, China*  
**2nd Place:** Thays Golz  
*Raca Centro de Artes, Brazil*  
**3rd Place:** Makensie Henson  
*Prudence Bowen Atelier, Australia*

## Top 12 Women

Bianca Gomes Vilarinho Teixeira  
*Ballett Akademie Hochschule für Musik und Theater, Germany*  
Danbi Kim  
*Lee Won A Dance Academy, South Korea*  
Fu Yiyang  
*Shanghai Dance School, China*  
Julia Rose Sherrill  
*The Rock School For Dance Education, PA, USA*  
Kenedy Kallas  
*Ballet West Academy Professional Training Division, UT, USA*  
Makensie Henson  
*Prudence Bowen Atelier, Australia*  
Mira Larsen  
*Academy of Ballet Arts, CA, USA*  
Sarah Schafer  
*Ballett-Akademie Hochschule für Musik und Theater, Germany*  
Thays Golz  
*Raca Centro de Artes, Brazil*  
Victoria Vassos  
*Independent, Switzerland*  
Yu Hang  
*Shanghai Dance School,*  
Yuka Iwai  
*Joffrey Academy of Dance, IL, USA*

## Senior Men

**1st Place:** Narcisco Alejandro Medina Arias  
*Escuela Nacional de Ballet Fernando Alonso, Cuba*  
**2nd Place:** Stanislaw Wegrzyn  
*Ballett-Akademie Hochschule für Musik und Theater, Germany*  
**3rd Place:** Motomi Kiyota  
*Mitsuko Inao Ballet School, Japan*

## Top 6 Men

Derek Drilon  
*Joffrey Academy of Dance, IL, USA*  
Joonhyuk Jun  
*The Royal Ballet School, UK*  
Motomi Kiyota  
*Mitsuko Inao Ballet School, Japan*  
Narcisco Alejandro Medina Arias  
*Escuela Nacional de Ballet Fernando Alonso, Cuba*  
Stanislaw Wegrzyn  
*Ballett-Akademie Hochschule für Musik und Theater, Germany*  
Xu Jingkun  
*Shanghai Dance School, China*

For a complete list of all winners please visit [www.yagp.org](http://www.yagp.org)



New York finalist Bianca Gomes Vilarinho Teixeira. Photo: Emma Kauldhar

New York - this year relocated to the Brooklyn Academy of Music due to the non-availability of the usual venue at Lincoln Center. Arriving three hours late, thanks to the conflation of two flights into one by British Airways, by the time I arrived the juniors had already performed. This was a great pity, as I was told that there had been some outstanding performances in the younger category. Fortunately, the seniors did not disappoint, and one of the first women to make a significant impact was Yu Hang from the Shanghai Dance School. Her polished Esmeralda was technically immaculate and seductively performed, and it was no surprise when she was awarded the first place.

Impressive also were Thays Golz from Brazil and Makensie Henson from Australia, who both delivered accomplished solos and were placed second and third respectively. Luisa Solowjowa from the Vienna State Opera Ballet School caught the eye with her exuberant *Don Q* variation, while Bianca Gomes Vilarinho Teixeira from Munich's Ballett-Akademie Hochschule für Musik und Theater soared through her *Satanella* with elan. *Giselle's* Act II is not an archetypal competition solo, in that it offers little opportunity for showy virtuosity, but two of the female finalists, Nika Afonina and Liao Fangqiao, gave particularly lovely renditions. Neither were placed in the top 12, but both surely have the potential to become professional dancers.

Overall, the standard of the senior women was commendably high - higher, this year, than the men in the same category, some of whom were disappointingly weak and lacked stage presence. Facial expressions were not always helpful and too many feet were just forgotten in jumps.

The group was not without some promise,

though, with the first place going to one Narcisco Alejandro Medina Arias, who trains at the Escuela Nacional de Ballet Fernando Alonso in Cuba, for a firecracker of a *Don Q*. Second was Stanislaw Wegrzyn from Munich's Ballett-Akademie Hochschule für Musik und Theater, who flew through his *Satanella* with much joie de vivre, and the third place went to the youngest dancer in this group, Motomi Kiyota, aged 15, from the Mitsuko Inao Ballet School, a natural talent. Another Japanese dancer, Jun Masada from the Variation Ballet School, gave another powerful *Don Q*, and noteworthy also for their individual qualities were Bai Dingkai (Shanghai Dance School), Cato Berry (The Rock School), George Lang (New Zealand School of Dance), Vincenzo Di Primo (Vienna State Opera Ballet School) and Derek Drilon (Joffrey Academy of Dance).

The top prize, the Grand Prix, was awarded to Royal Ballet School student Joonhyuk Jun, memorable for his pantherine jump and, too, for the almost nonchalant ease with which he presented his Solor variation. Last, but certainly not least, I had the pleasure of presenting *Dance Europe's* prize to a young Columbian dancer, Rafael Valdéz Ramirez, currently studying at the Kansas School of Classical Ballet. While he was not the most technically perfect dancer in the group, he is blessed with an innate elegance and has the potential to become a very employable danseur noble. It later transpired that he, along with the aforementioned Nika Afonina, have been offered contracts with Dutch National Ballet's Junior Company.

Following the Finals evening, the programme this year offered not one but two Stars of Today meet the Stars of Tomorrow Galas to accommodate the audience numbers in the



smaller venue. As is traditional, the first act of the gala is given over to finalists from this year's competition and the second presents a stream of international guest artists, including a number of YAGP alumni.

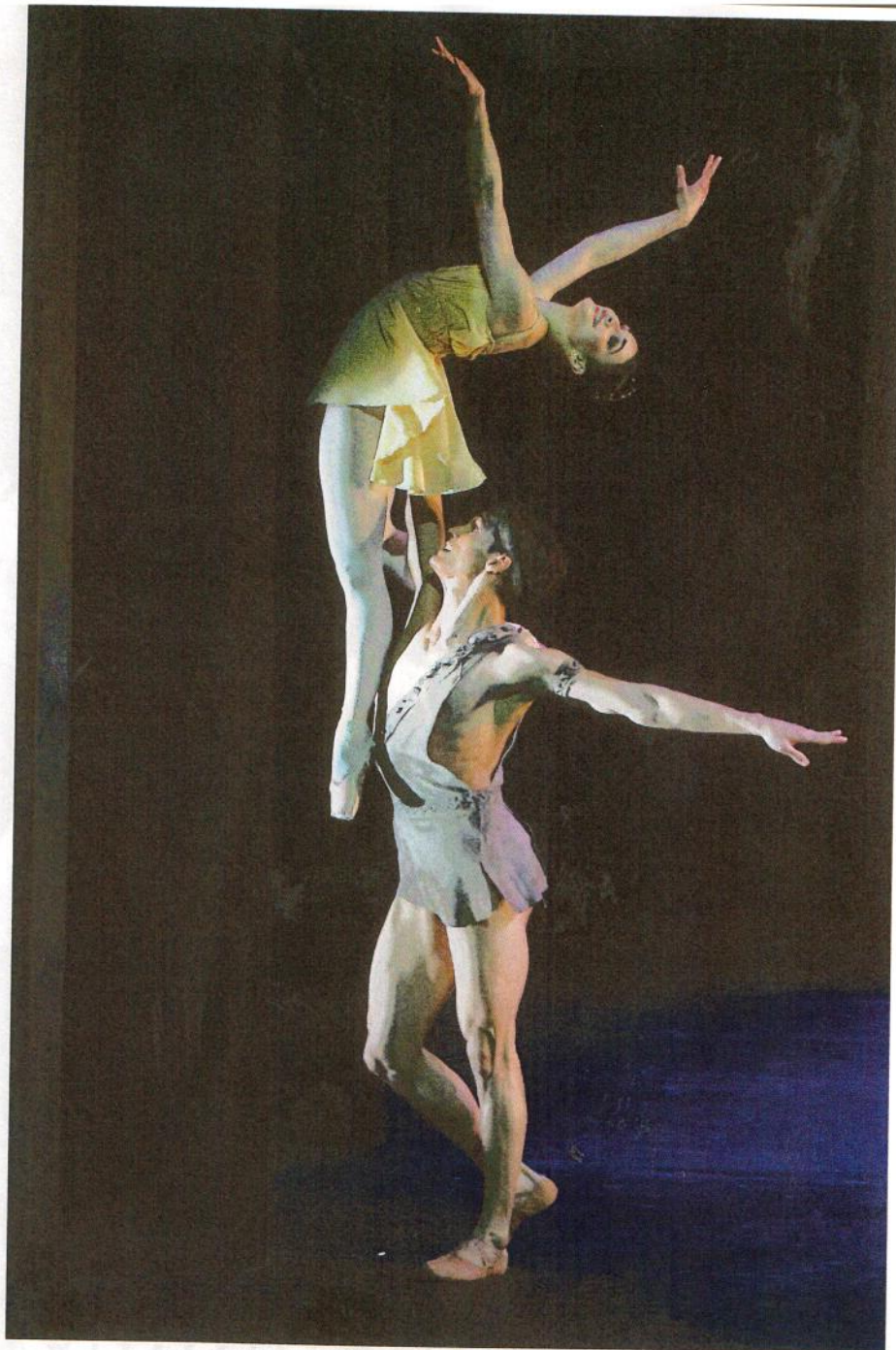
This year's YAGP commemorates the organisation's former Director of Operations of 12 years, Shelley King, who passed away last year. Despite her title, Shelley was no office-bound official, but rather a hands-on, friendly face with the capacity to solve any imminent crisis - from wayward competitors to fraught parents - with miraculous calm. An organiser supreme, she was also everyone's mother or confidante. In addition to a short film paying tribute to her priceless work for YAGP, it was fitting that her daughter, Rebecca King, a soloist with the Finnish National Ballet, performed in the gala, partnered by New York City Ballet's Amar Ramasar in Peter Quanz's free-spirited *Blushing*. Suffice to say that Shelley would have been very proud.

Two YAGP alumni making their New York professional debuts, Michaela DePrince and Edo Wijnen (who won the *Dance Europe* prize in 2010), both now dance with the Dutch National Ballet. The couple literally fizzed in Balanchine's infectious *Tarantella*, delivering the fast footwork with mercurial speed and precision, and also gave a very polished account of Juanjo Arques's steely *Rewind*.

From the Paris Opera, Hannah O'Neill and Hugo Marchand - two more YAGP alumni, who have both recently been promoted to premier danseurs - bravely presented the fiendishly difficult *La Esmeralda* pas de deux. Brave because the *Esmeralda* variations are popular choices in the competition, and so the pressure is on the guests big time! Fears were needless, though, in that O'Neill and Marchand both delivered the pyrotechnics with style and elegance.

A taste of *Marco Spada*, named after an Italian bandit and created by Pierre Lacotte for the Bolshoi in 2013, was offered by two of the company's principals, Ekaterina Krysanova and Artem Ovcharenko, clad in white costumes and wigs. Performed adrift from the rest of the ballet, the pas de deux afforded little more than a formal, if undeniably charming and impeccably danced, divertissement paying homage to the French school. In complete contrast, the irrepressible Daniel Ulbricht threw all cares to the wind as he jetted through his *Piazzolla Tango* - sure-fire gala fare that went down a treat.

Another remarkable dancer, Daniel Camargo - currently with Stuttgart Ballet but joining Dutch National Ballet next season - appeared twice: first in Katarzyna Kozielska's *Firebreather*, created on him for a gala in



Sarah Lane from ABT and Daniel Camargo from Stuttgart Ballet in *Diana and Acteon*. Photo: Emma Kauldhar

Prague last year and set to music by Ludovico Einaudi. The solo features the bare-chested dancer sharing the stage with pools of stark, white light that offer spots for various acrobatic leaps and contortions clearly designed to show off his physical prowess. But the full range of the Brazilian's versatility was arguably better exploited in the gala warhorse *Diana and Acteon*. That the indisposition of Gillian Murphy meant that he was presented with a new partner, a gallant Sarah Lane, at the ninth hour deserves a medal for sheer courage. Peppered with numerous showy lifts, *Diana and Acteon* is not the kind of piece you throw together in five minutes with someone you have not previously danced with, and so the two must be applauded not only for their sterling performance but for their sheer daring. Big bouquets for both.

More photos from this year's YAGP can be viewed at [www.danceeurope.net](http://www.danceeurope.net)