

## 11-year-old Anchorage dancer to perform in international scholarship competition



ANCHORAGE –

Mikayla Gyfteas' transformation from an 11-year-old to the charming gypsy Esmeralda begins with a gold headpiece and a touch of red lipstick. Next is the donning of a fire-red tutu and a tambourine to match. "Esmeralda is supposed to have an attitude," Mikayla explained. "Like, she thinks she's the best." The young dancer is quiet and reserved before the music starts, but once Cesare Pugni comes through the studio speakers at Anchorage Classical Ballet Academy, Mikayla gives attitude — and then some. "She's got a little fire in there," said the academy's artistic director, Michelangelo Canale, of Mikayla. "She has a grace and a style, naturally, a sense of performing to an audience."

In every extension of her legs to kick the tambourine above her head, Mikayla's commitment to master her craft shines through. For months, she, Canale and her other instructors at Anchorage Ballet have been getting her en pointe for the Youth America Grand Prix (YAGP) scholarship competition. "I've been practicing like five days a week, for like an hour and a half each," said the dancer, describing a touch of choreography she's been working to master. "At the end [of the dance], I think is the hardest, where you kick your leg forward and you have to balance at the end. It's really hard."

Those rigorous practices recently paid off with a win at the YAGP qualifier in San Francisco, an experience Mikayla describes as nerve-wracking but "pretty neat." "It was a stepping stone, an important stepping stone," Canale said of the win in California. "With professional training, it takes eight years to become a dancer, so she's at the first stage." But despite her young age, Canale says Mikayla is well on her way. The YAGP finals in New York City will host dancers from dozens of countries, competing for scholarships to the big schools.

The Bolshoi Ballet Academy and the American Ballet Theatre school are among those looking for the next class of ballerinas, a title Gyfteas has her sights set on. Canale says he's sure they would gladly take her, but he's not ready to

send her off just yet. “I would like to just shape and mold her before she leaves this nest here, and then she can fly strong” said Canale. “I know she wants a top of the world school, and I’ll prepare her for it.” Until then, Mikayla is working on mastering every movement and fixing every flaw, because both she and Canale agree ballet isn’t the most forgiving. “The key is not to make mistakes and always think of what comes next,” said Mikayla. “Modern, you can move freely and you can cover up mistakes better. And jazz is just sharp, sharp, sharp, and it’s easy to cover up things also.” But one thing Canale says a dancer can’t fake is the force inside. “They could have the body and the facility to do the work, but if they don’t have *this*, it’s going to be too hard,” Canale said in reference to the heart. “Because you have, you know, a zillion females that want the same thing. They all want the same dream, and not everyone can make it.”

Mikayla, he insists, is “passionate about the art form.” He’s hoping it will shine through for her grand finale in New York City.

*Mikayla will perform Friday in the YAGP Pre-Competitive Division. The live video broadcast [can be found here](#).*

By Sierra Starks 8:24 PM April 19, 2016