

LIFESTYLE

Two Kirkland dancers compete in semi-regional competition



106



0



0

by TJ MARTINELL, Kirkland Reporter Reporter
Jan 22, 2016 at 7:00AM

Two Kirkland dancers with the International Ballet Academy recently competed in the Youth America Grand Prix (YAGP) semi-regional competition in Bellevue, with one of them advancing to the finals in April.

For Gillian Smith, 13, a student at Kirkland Middle School, her second year participating in the annual competition, which took place Jan. 8-10, paid off with the necessary score to advance to the finals, while fellow Kirkland dancer Serene Wong, 14, received a chance to compete for the first time.

Smith said she first got into dancing when she was three and joined the academy at five after watching its performance of the Nutcracker, but it wasn't until last year she decided to enter the YAGP semi-finals. YAGP is the world's largest international student dance competition.

"I would go watch the older girls from past years and it looked really fun," she said. "I just really enjoy preparing for it."

Wong's foray into dance came after participating in one of her older sister's performances - but not from the stage.

"They had a recital and I started performing in the audience," she said.

For her, the semi-finals offered a chance to perform roles from ballets such as Don Quixote and La Bayadère that she otherwise wouldn't be able to as part of a normal ballet performance.

"I really like to perform," she said. "I thought it would be nice to be out there on my own."

After an injury last year Smith said she was cautiously about working on her routines too early, which included two from Sleeping Beauty.

"Some things are not entirely neutral for the body," she said.

Being more technical and complicated than her prior routines at the last semi-finals, she began training a little later in the year.

"I think I had a lot more challenges than last year," she said. "This year I was a little bit nervous but I was mostly excited."

Their performances, consisting of two classical routines and one contemporary, didn't come without preparation. Tutored by Artistic Director Vera Altunina and Assistant Artistic Director Francois Serre y Berga, they trained every day, starting the day after Christmas. Fortunately, Smith said this time she was able to avoid an injury.

When it finally came time to perform at the Meydenbauer Center in downtown Bellevue, Smith said it was to their benefit to dance on a familiar stage, and with their contemporary dance first, they were more relaxed performing the classical pieces. They also had a larger audience applauding them when their names were announced, as members from the academy had arrived to watch the performances.

Finally, when the scores were announced, Smith said she was stunned to find out she was heading to finals.

"I really didn't know what to do," she said. "I was shaking so hard I almost dropped the trophy."

With the finals taking place in New York this spring, Smith has plenty of time to prepare, aided in part by the detailed notes the judges made of her routines.

"I felt pretty good," Smith said. "I'd still notice some things after I was done on stage but I really liked being on stage this year and the experience of it."