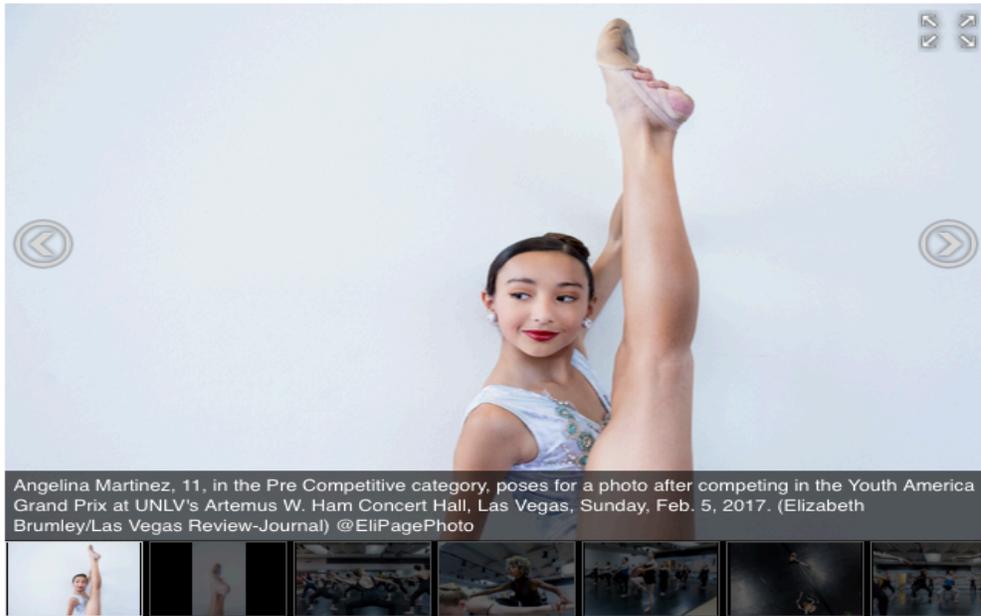


LAS VEGAS REVIEW JOURNAL



Posted February 5, 2017 - 7:42pm Updated February 6, 2017 - 12:07am

Dancers are in step and on pointe at Youth America Grand Prix in Las Vegas



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LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

With scholarships to top ballet schools on the line, this group had to stay on its toes.

With hair coiled in tight buns and glittery eyes to match their sparkling outfits, dancers stepped into the limelight at the Artemus W. Ham Concert Hall at UNLV Sunday. With each plié and sauté, performers showed the determination to win and the poise to contain their emotions if things went awry.

This was the regional semifinals of the Youth America Grand Prix, dubbed the world's largest student ballet scholarship competition.

“Those who pass and are talented enough to get a scholarship are basically on their way toward beginning their professional career,” said Gennadi Saveliev, the competition's co-founder.

All of the performers, mostly girls and a few boys, vied to reach the finals in New York City, where scholarships upward of \$250,000 are awarded. The Las Vegas competition started Thursday and drew students from 70 dance schools from 16 U.S. states and nations including China, Mexico and Canada, said Larissa Saveliev, the nonprofit's co-founder. About 400 students competed.

Over 18 years, the Youth America Grand Prix has awarded more than \$3 million in scholarships, Saveliev said. There are 350 alumni dancing with 80 companies around the world, she added.

The pressure was high Sunday, but the troupers were prepared.

“Being up there on stage was nerve-wracking,” Jacie Foster, 12, said. “The stage seemed bigger than it really was, but once I started performing, I just loved it.”

Foster has been practicing ballet less than a year, but she said she's been giving it her all, practicing two to five hours a day, six days a week.

The performers come with practice — training least three hours a day five days a week — and presence. The performers glowed with confidence and brimmed with technique, matching facial expression to music and showing they can act as well as dance.

Sometimes, dancers blended classic techniques with modern rock flair. Fiona Fanoë and Alexa Julian, both 12 and from Monterey Bay, California, for example, performed a choir-cover version of Nirvana's “Smells Like Teen Spirit.”

Teenage angst showed in their grim faces and a slow, hunched walk toward the end of the performance.

“It was a duet based on our friendship,” Julian said. “We were pulled apart, but we came back together again.”

Fanoë said, “Ballet definitely brings people together. It brought us closer.”

Back in the lobby, 11-year-old Angelina Martinez jumped and danced with joy after learning that she passed with her group ensemble.

“My mom was a ballerina and she inspired me to start dancing,” said Angelina, who came from Corona, California. “I hope to become a professional ballerina one day.”

“Many students are technically talented as well as artistically talented,” said Kelly Boal, judge and teacher at the Pacific Northwest Ballet School in Seattle and former New York City Ballet soloist. “It’s so rare to see young dancers with a sense of integrity, refinement and maturity that is well beyond their years.”

Although judges rate aesthetics and technical performance, Boal stresses that dancers shouldn’t compare themselves with one another.

“I tell students that they should learn from those who do better and first and foremost have fun,” Boal said. “At the end of the day, ballet is about having a good time.”