

# Las Vegas ballet competition draws young hopefuls dreaming of national stage

By [Adwoa Fosu](#) (contact)

Saturday, Jan. 31, 2015 | 6 p.m.

“One, two, three ... one, two, three,” a woman chants, gently snapping her fingers as a young girl twirls in time to the rhythm.

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With the girl dressed in white tights, a vibrant red leotard and a matching red tutu, her nimble movements add a new flash of color into what is already a rainbow backstage at the Artemus W. Ham Concert Hall at UNLV.

Flickers of white, purple, pink and blue surround her as other young girls and boys, all dressed in colorful ballet costumes, stretch their limbs and rehearse their dance routines in preparation for their moment onstage in the Youth America Grand Prix Regional Semi Finals.

The young dancers, along with their families and dance schools, have traveled to Las Vegas — just one stop in the organization’s 20 city international tour — from places such as California and Canada for a chance to participate in the world’s largest student scholarship competition.

Here, they will perform in front of a panel of judges, each of them dancers in their own right, in the hopes of earning a scholarship to an internationally acclaimed dance school and the opportunity to travel to New York City to compete in the finals.

“It’s kind of like an ‘American Idol’ for ballet kids,” said Larissa Saveliev, who founded the YAGP 16 years ago as a way to give dancers from the ages of 9 to 19 an outlet to hone their craft.

Since its founding, YAGP has awarded more than \$3,000,000 in scholarships and landed dancers in companies such as the American Ballet Theater and the Paris Opera Ballet.

One dancer hoping to earn a scholarship is 11-year-old Sasha Jovanovic-Hacon of Salt Lake City, who got into ballet after accompanying his little sister to her studio’s “bring a friend to ballet” day.

“Dance allows me to express the music that I play,” said Jovanovic-Hacon, who is proficient in the violin and piano.

He sees this competition as an opportunity for him to get closer to his goal of someday becoming a professional dancer.

“I feel that people pay a lot of special attention, especially to boys,” Jovanovic-Hacon said. “I feel that

(dance) will get me a lot more opportunities than others paths that boys my age take.”

Although performing in competitions can be quite nerve-wracking, Jovanovic-Hacon enjoys the thrill of showcasing the skills he’s learned during his daily four-hour practices.

The joy of being onstage remedies the nerves of dancers such as 11-year-old Jasmine Gilbert of Orange County, Calif., as well.

“Once I get out there, I just feel good,” said Gilbert, who hopes to one day become a dancer with the American Ballet Theater.

It is a dream she knows will take a lot of hard work and dedication. But she too is no stranger to practicing four or five hours a day, which she admits leaves her with little time to see friends.

“Sometimes, I’ve felt like this is too much, but I never wanted to stop,” Gilbert said. “I’ve always wanted to push through it.”

This kind of mindset, Saveliev believes, is one of the benefits young dancers get from participating in ballet.

“Even if they don’t become a professional dancer, (discipline) will be a great help in life,” she said.

The dancers aren’t the only ones who are invested in this rigorous pastime. Ballet often becomes a family activity as well, as parents spend hours shuttling their kids back and forth to practice and accompanying them to competitions across the country.

“It’s very time-consuming, but I know it’s something my daughter loves,” said JoAnne Cheechov, who flew in with the 14-year-old contestant from Portland, Ore.

While reality shows such as Lifetime’s “Dance Moms” portray the world of dance as a cut-throat environment, Cheechov says that is not true for everyone, as was demonstrated by the generally serene mood at the competition.

“There are ups and downs, but the best thing I can do for (my daughter) is be supportive,” she said.

The two-day competition concludes Saturday night with an awards ceremony.

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