

A&E

A LOCAL 17-YEAR-OLD REPS THE VEGAS BALLET SCENE ON A NATIONAL STAGE



Las Vegas News special event, 17, recently appeared in dance classes at the Keith Flower Ballet Studio on Wednesday, March 25, 2015. She's going to New York City in April with instructor Tara Hoy to compete for a chance to attend the prestigious Bolshoi Ballet Academy.

Photo: Tom Gaskins

Sarah Feldberg

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Monika Haczekiewicz floats across the floor in a series of spins and jumps. A faint smile on her face, she pops onto the blunted toe of one satiny pointe shoe. A pink-tighted leg flies above her head as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

Alone in the studio, proportions are hard to judge. Those lithe, powerful legs seem too long for the slender body attached to them. They stretch forever, swinging forward and back, propelling the dancer up, up, up. She must be 5-foot-10, even 6 feet.

Haczekiewicz giggles. She's actually 5-foot-5. Compared to most ballerinas, she says, "I'm really short."

Compared to most high school ballerinas, the 17-year-old Las Vegas Academy junior is also immensely talented. The daughter of current and former Cirque du Soleil acrobats, Haczekiewicz possesses that potent stew of athletic genes, natural ability and an intense training regimen. She's the rare little girl who dreamt of being a professional ballerina and might actually be one. While other kids dropped dance classes for softball teams or school plays, Haczekiewicz has been practicing—attending ballet school, traveling to summer intensives, performing with Las Vegas Ballet Company—for almost her entire life. Since she first put on a tutu at age 3, she's been working toward this year and this moment, toward the opportunity to show the greater ballet world what she can do. Now, if everything goes right, if she dances as well as she is capable of, if she can focus under the fog of enormous pressure, this could be the start of a beautiful career.

For those not entrenched in the world of professional ballet, the Youth America Grand Prix, or YAGP, usually elicits blank stares or perhaps a well-meaning question about car racing. But for young dancers hoping to make a living out of pirouettes and grand pliés,

the annual event is like the BCS Championship and NFL Scouting Combine rolled into one.

Founded in 1999 by a pair of former dancers from Russia's renowned Bolshoi Ballet, YAGP is both showcase and contest, an international summit that scouts up-and-coming talent then puts the best and brightest in front of artistic directors from many of the top ballet companies in the world. Catch the right eye and even if you don't win, you could be going home with a scholarship or contract.

"If you really are serious about becoming a professional ballet dancer, it's a wonderful thing to do," says Monique Meunier, a former principal dancer with New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre soloist who judges for YAGP. "The exposure—you need the right training, the right teacher, the right facilities, the brain for it—if you pass, you will be seen."

Most talented kids, however, will not be seen. To "pass" on to the finals in New York, ballet dancers first need to navigate one of the regional semifinals, earning at least an average score of 95 points out of 100. In some cities no one advances—dreams are dashed, hard lessons swallowed.

For 2015, YAGP held 19 semifinals, from Buenos Aires and Osaka to San Francisco and Austin. And for the first time ever, they came to Las Vegas.

"I said to the girls, 'There will be a lot of competition. There will be a lot of people coming to Las Vegas from everywhere, because they think there's no talent here,'" says Tara Foy, artistic director of Tara Foy's Elite Ballet and Haczkiewicz's coach.

Foy wore the town's reputation like a badge of honor, determined to show that serious ballerinas are being made here. Haczkiewicz is Exhibit A.

The Vegas native has the physique of a dancer—wide shoulders over a tiny waist resting atop "incredible, gorgeous, long, hyper-extended legs," as Foy describes them.

"But she also has a strength behind her dancing," says Vegas-based judge Meunier. "That's a very difficult combination to find, the mix of flexibility and strength."

Which is not to say that Haczkiewicz is a fully formed prima ballerina. Like any developing dancer, she has problem areas: proper alignment, maintaining her turnout, weak hips. She and Foy have been working on those issues for five months, preparing for YAGP with weekday afternoons of pointe work, floor barre and pilates, spending weekends drilling solos again and again.

Asked how many hours a week she trains, the full-time high school student sounds daunted. "Oh my gosh ... Hold on," Haczkiewicz says, counting quietly to herself. "Thirty or more hours. It's a lot of work."

There are days, of course, when she'd rather go to the mall with friends than pull on her leotard and head back to the barre. "I cannot stand doing pilates and floor barre," she laughs. "I just want to put my pointe shoes on and dance."

"When I'm onstage it's the most amazing feeling in the entire world. I can't explain. It just feels so amazing. I love it."



Photo: L.E. Baskow

Ballerina Monika Haczkiewicz, 17, leaps while in dance class inside the Keith Kliven Institute on Wednesday, March, 25, 2015. She's going to New York City in April with instructor Tara Foy to compete for a chance to attend a prestigious dance school or join a ballet company.

That's important, too. The panel at YAGP is assessing technique and positioning, but it's also searching for an emotional connection with the audience, a true performer who brings something extra to the stage.

"We're looking for potential," says Meunier. "The body, the feet and the legs. If you're trained properly, there's a certain quality. You can just tell by the way they walk out. You know immediately."

When Haczkiewicz stepped onstage to perform variations of Don Quixote and Giselle at the Las Vegas semifinal on January 31, Meunier recognized that spark of potential.



Photo: [L.E. Baskow](#)

(from left) Ballerina Monika Haczkiewicz, 17, does bar exercises with direction from instructor Tara Foy during dance class inside the Keith Kleven Institute on Wednesday, March, 4, 2015. She's going to New York City in April with Foy to compete for a chance to attend a prestigious dance school or join a ballet company.

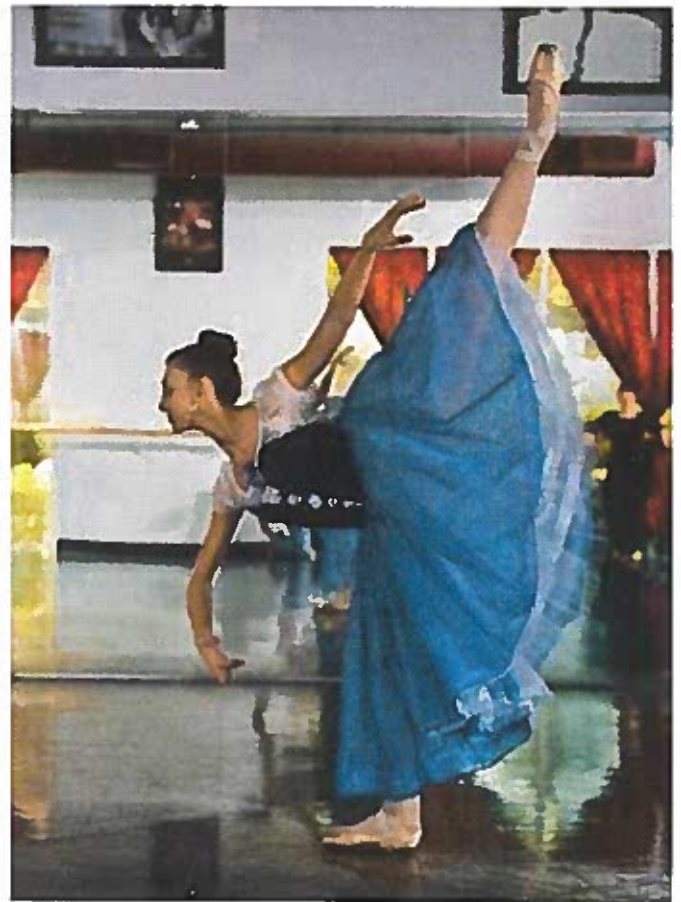


Photo: [L.E. Baskow](#)

Ballerina Monika Haczkiewicz, 17, arches over while in dance class inside the Keith Kleven Institute on Wednesday, March, 25, 2015. She's going to New York City in April with instructor Tara Foy to compete for a chance to attend a prestigious dance school or join a ballet company.

"She tore it up out there. I felt like I was watching a performance, not a competition. And we all saw it; we were like, 'Whoa.'"

Sewn into her pointe shoes with dental floss, Haczkiewicz felt it, too. In the audience, her mother Ursula felt it, pride overwhelming the jittery nerves. And Foy felt it, even after seeing the pieces rehearsed countless times.

"I had tears in my eyes. I cried," Foy recalls jubilantly. "It was the most incredible thing that I had seen from one of my students—holding the arabesque, that wistfulness, the lightness of the way she was portraying Giselle."

Haczkiewicz placed second in Las Vegas, scoring the 95 she needed to move on to the YAGP finals in New York. She'll spend a week there, attending master classes under the gaze of companies like the Royal Ballet and American Ballet Theatre, and preparing to run her solos one last time in front of the judges at Lincoln Center on April 15. She could come home with a contract for a major ballet company, she could be offered a coveted scholarship, she could even be the object of a ballet bidding war. Or she could be heading back to Las Vegas Academy for her senior year.

"She's going to be up against some wicked talent," Foy says. But "for me, she's already won. Whether she comes in first or 150th, that is immaterial. It's the buildup to this, it's going through the process of this. She is prepared for anything and everything."