

NURTURING THE

Gift

When hypertalented ballet competitors achieve acclaim at a very young age, what is left for them to master? A great deal, according to their coaches.

BY CAITLIN SIMS

Aran Bell bounces into the 2011 documentary *First Position* on a pogo stick, then shows off his BB gun. When the film cuts to Bell, then 11, doing à la seconde turns in ballet class, the illusion of ordinary childhood is shattered. Teacher Denys Ganio cajoles, bellows, swats and almost lifts Aran by the ears to a higher relevé, matching the hypertalented young boy's commitment with his own focus. As the film tracks the progress of six young ballet superstars, a common thread throughout their stories is their teachers' dedication. One message is clear—nurturing a ballet prodigy requires much more than teaching technique.

While achieving life goals so early sounds ideal, the reality is that launching a professional career while still a teen can be challenging. Being one of many dancers in a large professional company or school is vastly different from the personal attention and accolades many prodigies are used to, and progress through the ranks is often slower. For teachers, working with students who have mastered the moves but are still very young is a delicate balancing act.

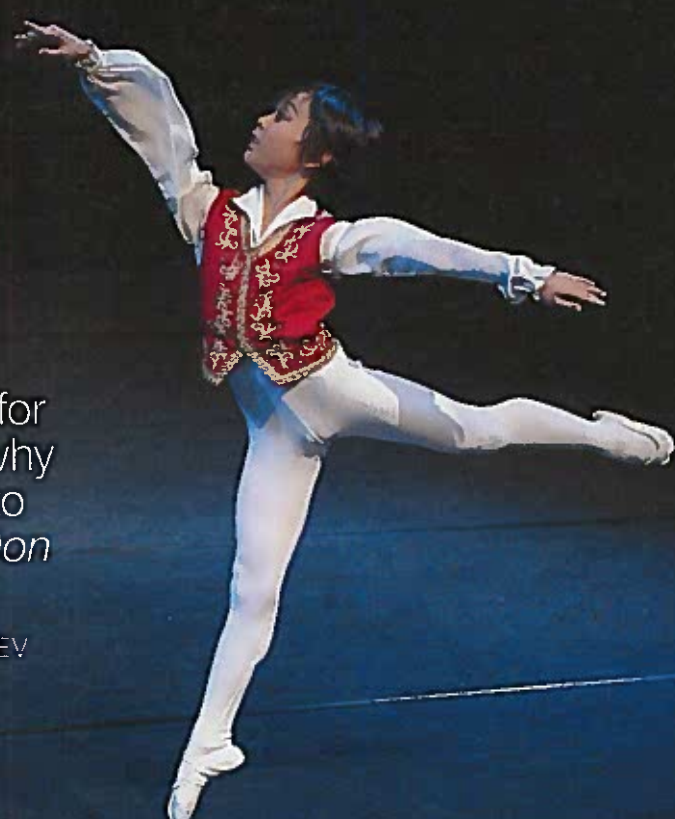
OVERCOMING INERTIA

For many successful young competitors, when the trophies are shelved and tutus packed away, getting back to the daily grind is a letdown. "Sometimes it's difficult for teachers to get them back to class," says Youth America Grand Prix director Larissa Saveliev, "because emotionally it's hard for them to understand why you have to go back to tendu after dancing *Don Q* onstage."

What Saveliev notices is missing in some young superstars—a solid technical base—can seem irrelevant to someone with shiny new medals, proud parents and a burgeoning Twitter following. Evelyn Hart, former Canadian ballerina who now acts as a coach and mentor, stresses to students that it's the constant work that makes the star. "You're only as good as your last performance," she says. "To become an established dancer, it's day in, day out work, until you build up the knowledge of what to bring to the stage."

TEMPERING SOCIAL-MEDIA CELEBRITY

The instant fame that comes to competition winners can be a heady distraction.



"Emotionally it's hard for them to understand why you have to go back to tendu after dancing *Don Q* onstage."

—LARISSA SAVELIEV

Daichi Ikarashi
competed with YAGP
in Japan at age 10.

While there have always been baby ballerinas, they've never been as widely celebrated as in the years since social media exploded. "Daichi Ikarashi may be the most talented boy we've seen in our 15-year history," says Saveliev. "After he won in Japan, he got thousands of YouTube views. He's only 12." And there can be a dark side to celebrity for the very young, says Hart. "Suddenly they feel they have to be perfect. When you have that kind of pressure, the learning stops. Young dancers need a safe space to experiment. Even though they've accomplished so much, there's still much more to learn."

BALANCING DEMANDS

Once dancers have achieved a certain level of success and recognition, the pressure to maintain it can be intense. The challenge for teachers is to remind them that they are still kids, says Stephanie Wolf Spassoff, co-director of The Rock School for Dance Education. "You have to protect them, sometimes from themselves. Sometimes they'll take on too much. Then they're not dancing because they love it, but because they've gotten themselves onto a merry-go-round they don't know how to slow down." Spassoff has worked with students to free

to take on every performance opportunity or attend every competition.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE INDIVIDUAL

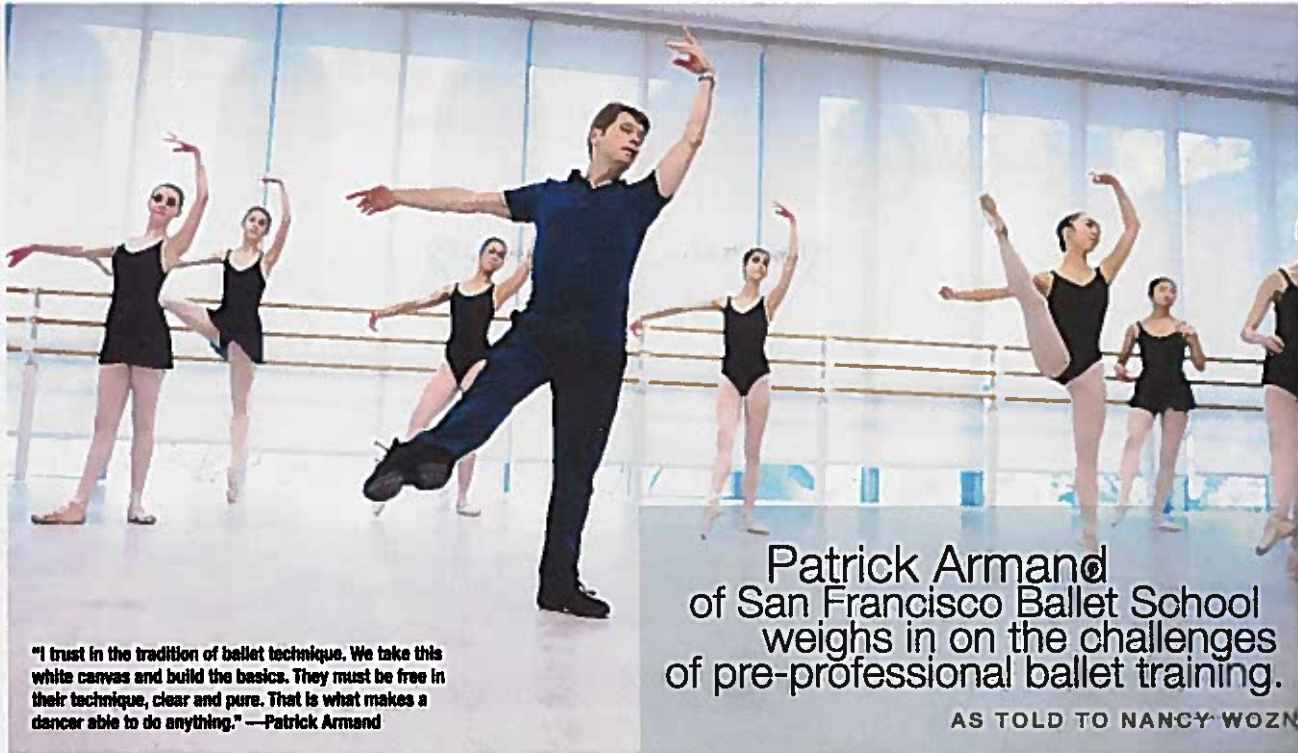
Ironically, early success can even lead to early plateaus. Westlake School for the Performing Arts' Viktor Kabaniaev, who says he's seen dancers (and parents) whose heads have swelled after competition victories, suggests that natural talents can end up with less training. "When you look at professional dancers, some are very talented, others are less naturally talented but are knowledgeable, skilled and have great training. They are dancing in the same companies and in some cases, the less talented are principals. Why? Because the raw talent didn't get as much training."

Many competitions offer scholarships to professional schools, which can be an exciting stepping stone toward a company contract. While some students are ready to jump from individualized training to the more formal setting of a big institution, others still need more attention in a smaller setting to fill out their training.

Equally as challenging is the question of when to make the leap from student to professional



Evelyn Hart began coaching prodigy Alys Shee at age 12. Now 20, Shee (pictured here)



"I trust in the tradition of ballet technique. We take this white canvas and build the basics. They must be free in their technique, clear and pure. That is what makes a dancer able to do anything." —Patrick Armand

Patrick Armand
of San Francisco Ballet School
weighs in on the challenges
of pre-professional ballet training.

AS TOLD TO NANCY WOZNIAK

including Isaac Hernández of Dutch National Ballet (Best Male Dancer, YAGP Junior Division at age 12; Youth Grand Prix, at 13) and his younger brother Esteban of San Francisco Ballet (YAGP Junior Division Silver Medal at age 12; Gold Medal at 13). "Isaac was offered wonderful jobs at 16, and he stayed at the school another year," she says. "Later he told me, 'If I had it to do again, I'd have stayed one more year.' I don't know that Esteban would have said the same thing. Each one has their own road."

Teachers can make recommendations based on a student's maturity and skill, but ultimately these decisions are made by the students and their parents or guardians. "Teachers need to be able to stand back and give them the freedom they need, but still be able to guide and advise, and hope they are able to make the right decisions," says Hart.

CREATING STAGE TIME

Meanwhile, continuing to develop performance skills is essential for these dancers. Slawomir Wozniak started a pre-professional performing group in part so his student Gisele Bethea could get stage experience. Bethea (YAGP Youth Grand Prix winner at age 13), who was offered a contract with American Ballet Theatre's Studio Company at age 15, has chosen to continue to train with her teacher at Master Ballet Academy in Arizona. "Performing the lead in an hour-and-a-half show is different than an eight-minute competition piece," Wozniak says. Spassoff, too, created additional performing opportunities for Isaac Hernández in his last year at The Rock School, particularly so he could develop

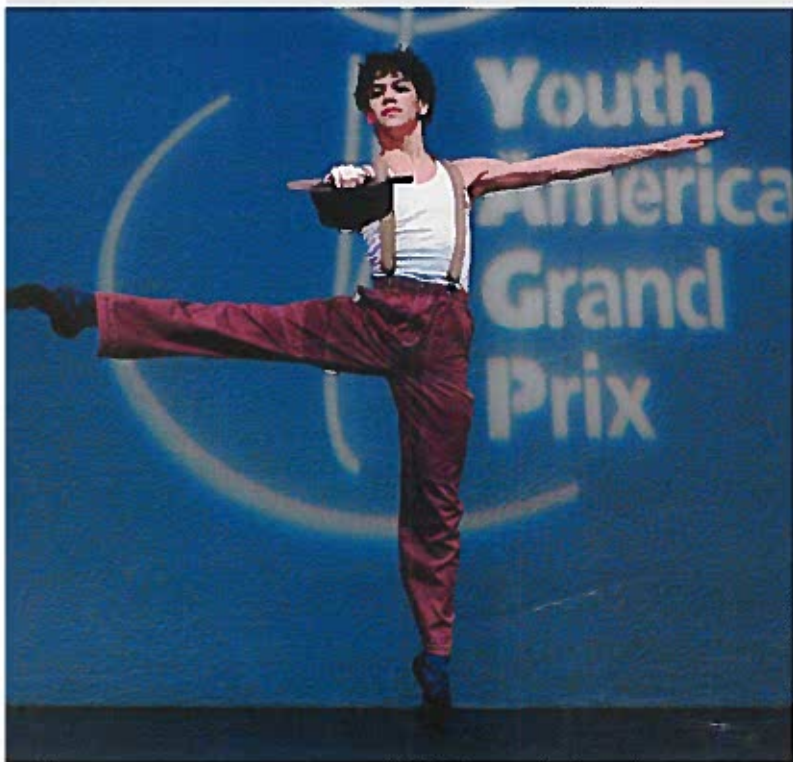
I am concerned with what is happening in ballet right now. There's too much emphasis on technique and not enough on artistry. Yes, technique is improving, but if you do a hundred pirouettes, you still need to start and end properly. Ballet is an artform, not a sport.

In this age of social media, too many students want to be stars before they have done anything. That is a problem. I find this also affects partnering. Good partnering is about being humble; it is not all about you. The man must always be thinking about the girl. You must make the girl look the best that she can be. It's not about lifting at all, but how you bring her down. She must appear weightless.

We have recently added to our services that support the well-being of the dancer. For instance, a nutritionist comes in two times a month, and she actually teaches them how to cook. They also have access to a physical therapist. And they do not need to wait until they have an injury. They learn to take care of themselves before they need it.

Our dancers need to be as versatile as possible. We must challenge their intellects and develop their ballet brains. We do this a number of ways: from contemporary classes to encouraging our dancers to choreograph through a year-long collaboration with the Crowdfunder Music Center. The exchange program we are doing with Houston Ballet [School] is another example. It's fantastic. They get to work with other dancers and come together a week to perform a show. It's great training for their future when they'll have to learn a new choreographer's work quickly.

As for emotional maturity, each student is different, and you can't approach each the same way. I can be there as a teacher and a mentor, but at the end of the day they must take responsibility for their careers and they must do this at a young age. I can help, but it really is up to them. I don't want to be overprotective, which does not serve them once they enter a company. Ballet is not Walt Disney World. It's not about being pink all the time.

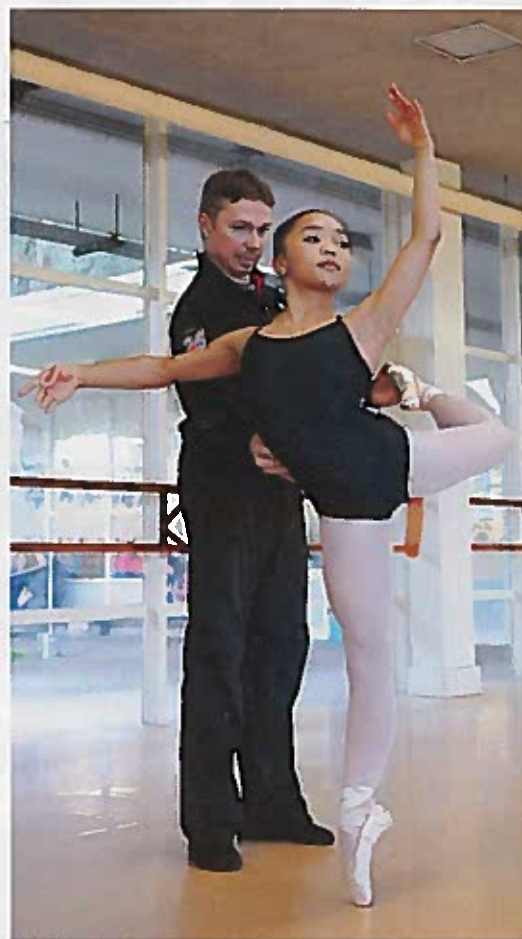


Isaac Hernández won the Youth Grand Prix prize at 13. Right: Viktor Kabaniaev coaches 13-year-old Jasmine Cruz.

PREPARING FOR THE REALITIES OF PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Beyond performance, young stars often need emotional support from teachers. “I spend much of my time psychologically helping my students,” says Hart, who coached Alys Shee of Birmingham Royal Ballet (Junior Silver Medal at USA IBC in Jackson at age 16; Grand Prix at Star of the 21st Century IBC). “A lot of it is helping them deal with their own frustration and how to think about their challenges and disappointments, so they can keep pulling out the best in themselves.” Hart spends time talking with students, helping them gauge when their expectations of themselves are too high or low. “There is so much pressure put on somebody with that kind of talent,” she says. Her antidote to perfectionism and self-doubt is to keep the dancer focused on intricacies of daily work. “I tell them, ‘No one can take away the richness of whatever you do, if you find the intrinsic value in the work.’”

Because being part of a professional company requires much more than good technique, there are life lessons that are valuable to young dancers not yet wise in the ways of the world. “Learning to live on your own, how to deal with the politics and relationships of a ballet company, those have nothing to do with how well you do the steps,” says Hart. “As a teacher, it’s a matter of giving students the tools and understanding to carry them through.” And after they leave her formal training, she remains available as an (unobtrusive) mentor. “It’s important to provide the dancer a safe place she knows she can always come back to,” she says, “to reas-



Kabaniaev approaches this by preparing students like 13-year-old phenom Jasmine Cruz (World Ballet Competition Gold Medal at age 10; New York City Dance Alliance Mini Outstanding Dancer, age 11 for success without him. “I try to make them independent from a young age,” he says. “To think for themselves and not just wait for what the teacher gives them. When they listen and develop their own mind, they learn to make good choices.”

In the end, teaching a prodigy involves training as individual as the dancer. “You have to have been born with fabulous ingredients to be a ballerina, says Hart. “Musicality, a beautiful physique, heart and soul and a will of steel, and yet you also need the people and circumstances around you to help you grow. Developing a ballerina is a journey—physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally.”

Aran Bell has continued his own journey, post *First Position*. Now 16 and living in New York, he’s currently dancing and training with ABT Studio Company in the hope he might be one of the elite to make it to the place all prodigies (and their teachers) aim for—the brilliance of center stage. **DT**

Caitlin Sims is a freelance writer based in Sa