

Young Savannah ballerina takes turn at major dance competition

At the barré in the plié position, Abigail White expresses confidence as she stands heels together and toes pointed outward, bending her knees, back straight, head up. Her left hand is on the barré and right hand above her head as if she were ready to take a bow. She is warming up for her private ballet lesson with Ryen McGee, owner and artistic director of A Class Act Dance Center in Pooler.

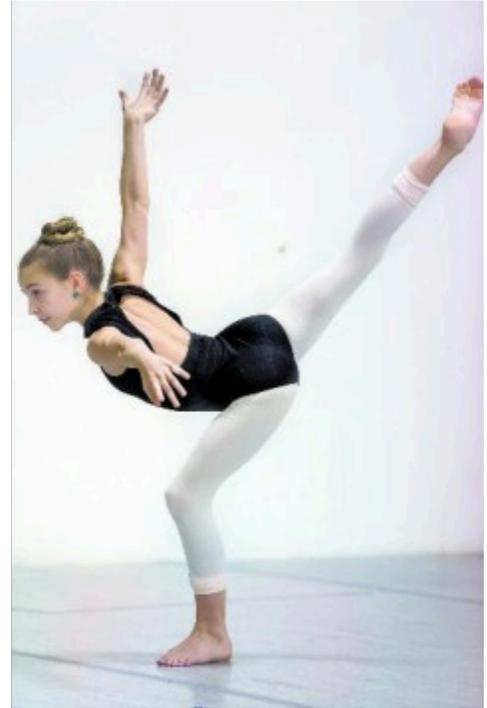
Those lessons have become more focused as 12-year-old Abi becomes more successful in classical and contemporary dance competitions around the Southeast. Last fall she set a goal to qualify for the Youth America Grand Prix finals in New York City. She did that in January at a regional Grand Prix event in Tampa where she qualified in classical ballet and in contemporary dance, a fusion of ballet and jazz.

The Grand Prix finals are Friday through April 29 where she will be taking dance classes. She will be learning the dance for a group performance at the Youth America Grand Prix gala at the Brooklyn School of Music Howard Gilman Opera House. And of course, she will be competing. She's already a winner for qualifying to be there. Abi hopes to earn a scholarship in a summer-long program in 2017 and to be noticed by ballet company directors. She's booked this summer for five weeks at the Next Generation Ballet in Tampa.

Hard work and natural talent have awarded her many first place standings in solo competitions, along with full scholarships to The Joffery Ballet in New York City and the Sarasota Ballet in Florida, McGee said. McGee herself has extensive training, including in New York City at the Joffery and with Melissa Hayden, one of George Balanchine's first ballerinas. Abi started dancing at 3; she started at A Class Act at 5. "I wanted her to have something recreational," her mother, Valerie White, said. "From a dancer's and teacher's perspective," McGee said, "I knew right away she had the talent. I knew from her body type and her flexibility. I knew this was someone who could be trainable."

After a few years of classes, Abi wanted a break. "She took a year off and danced around the house every day for a year," her mother said. Then Abi watched "First Position," a documentary where six young ballet students prepare for the Youth America Grand Prix. She went back to dance classes when she was 8. She started setting goals for herself. One of those goals was achieved with the Savannah Ballet Theatre's "Nutcracker" production in 2014 when Abi was awarded the role of Clara, McGee said.

This year, her weekday routine includes a group dance class at the start of her day at Esther F. Garrison School of Visual and Performing Arts in Savannah. Abi is in the sixth grade. That one hour class is followed by academics, Abi said, and she favors astronomy and math. Then she heads to Pooler for her group and private lessons at A Class Act. Those evening classes can last three to four hours each. Her classes include



ballet, pointe/variation, Pilates, contemporary and jazz, McGee said. "I have a passion for it," Abi said in her soft voice. "I enjoy it and I want to work hard at it."

In group classes, she said she practices her technique. In private lessons, she practices her competitive dance routines. On weekends, she said, "sometimes I practice." Her mother has retrofitted garage space to include a floating dance floor similar to the one at the studio. "Sometimes I go to competitions. Sometimes I hang out with my friends. Some of my friends are gymnasts and dancers," Abi said. "We make up dances. Sometimes we walk around the neighborhood and look at the houses under construction." That brings a laugh from her, her mother and McGee. When asked her favorite dance movements, Abi said she is a turner. "I like to do a lot of pirouettes."

In New York, Abi will perform a solo variation of the classical ballet "Coppelia" about a boy who falls in love with a doll, and the girl who falls in love with that boy. "She will be judged on the interpretation or varying of the steps," McGee said. She has 2 minutes and 36 seconds to make an impact on the judges. Her contemporary dance routine was choreographed by McGee, and Abi has about the same amount of time to perform it. "You are talking about hundreds of kids," McGee said of the competition. "They go on stage for 2 minutes for an opportunity for a scholarship. You have child after child all day long. There are a lot of kids who work very hard for this."

A bonus to competing at the Grand Prix finals is the dancer will be noticed by artistic directors of major dance companies. "It's a chance for them to be seen, to win something like this in New York City in front of many different directors and owners of dance companies. She has more chances of being hired later on," McGee said. "This is an opportunity for an internship or scholarship and to move on and train beyond my studio." Mom Valerie said she is proud of Abi. "It's good to have your child involved in something," she said. "It creates such a discipline. Having to stand at the barré and be sure your alignment is proper. It's very health motivated and disciplined. She works hard and she plays hard. She has fantastic grades. She's always been an A student. A lot of dancers tend to do well in school. Discipline in this area creates discipline in every area." For Abi, she just keeps setting goals one ballet step at a time. "This is really a big competition," Abi said of the Grand Prix in New York. "I kind of felt good when I got invited. I want to get into a conservatory in New York and dance in a year-round program to train."

Posted April 18, 2016 11:06 pm - Updated April 19, 2016 09:32 am
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