

An Inclusive Site for Dancers and Dance Audiences

■ BALLET (USA & CANADA), MODERN/CONTEMPORARY DANCE (USA & CANADA), REVIEWS

Youth America Grand Prix: New York Finals

Skirball Center & David H. Koch Theater, New York, NY; April 3-10, 2014

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Every spring, New York is invaded by a mass of uniformed visitors, taking in the sites and being gawked at by intrigued and sometimes worshipful civilians. This year is no different. No, I'm not talking about Fleet Week, where hordes of men and women in naval uniforms meander through the streets of Manhattan. The invading masses last week were predominantly little and not so little bunheads, and the uniforms of choice were leotards, tights, and tutus. Youth America Grand Prix was back.

This year I decided to take in more than just the final evening of the competition and its galas. To get a better flavor of the event as a whole, I attended one round of finals at the Skirball Center for the Performing Arts in Greenwich Village; and the Junior and Senior Solo Final on April 9, and the awards ceremony on April 10, both at Lincoln Center's David H. Koch Theater.

The annual 'Stars of Today Meet the Stars of Tomorrow' and special Fifteenth Anniversary celebration galas are reviewed separately.

A lot of ink has been spilled about the value of competitions in dance, as well as the purported increasing preeminence of athletic proficiency over artistic style. As I wrote last year, I don't particularly like the idea of dance competitions for those reasons, and also because to a large extent weighing the relative merits of individual performances is like comparing apples and oranges, particularly with respect to the solo contemporary and ensemble dances, where each performance is to individualized music and choreography.

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But competitions in the arts, including the performing arts, and including dance, have a long and celebrated history, and they're here to stay. The increasing athleticism, the ascendancy of 'tricks', is a different matter, but it too is not likely to disappear anytime soon. Whether this is the product of audience preference, a teacher or school director's calculation, an artistic director's decision to stimulate ticket sales by casting dancers known more for their athletic prowess than their stylistic purity, or merely an individual dancer's effort to stand, or step, out, is a chicken and egg question. But to the extent 'tricks' are a preeminent ingredient in evaluating and responding to a dance performance, this is hardly the product of competitions: they've been around a long time – certainly since 1893, when Pierina Legnani reportedly inserted 32 consecutive fouettés into her bravura performance in "Cinderella", before dancing a 28 fouetté encore in response to entreaties from the bedazzled St. Petersburg audience.

With that in mind, to me competitions such as YAGP are not a bad thing for the art form. On the contrary, they keep the art from stagnating, and the educational opportunities that competitions such as YAGP provide help preserve it and open it to an ever-widening range of performers and enthusiasts.

Other than through internet clips, I am not familiar with other similar competitions. But what seems to set YAGP apart is its worldwide scope (over 7,000 contestants auditioned at venues spanning six continents) and its mantra that 'winning' an award is not the only measure of a winner. The explosive growth and prominence that YAGP, led by co-founders Larissa and Gennadi Saveliev, have accomplished in its 15 years, whether one likes competitions or not, is at least remarkable. I'm sure there are rivalries and inflated egos within this competition – there have to be. But other than the simple fact of life that when the ratio of girls to boys is naturally and overwhelmingly skewed in favor of the girls, the boys are greeted and fawned over like dancing rock stars, what stands out to me is the apparent collegiality, the ready recognition and enthusiastic acknowledgement of talent demonstrated by other contestants, and the understanding, at least by the young dancers, that winning isn't everything. While I walked through the nooks and crannies of the Skirball Center trying to maneuver my way through the wall-to-wall dancers and not step on little girls' toes, I overheard a group of preteen girls wondering why they were here and what the point of this was, since they clearly weren't going to win an award. An older woman (maybe age 14), perhaps from the same school, joined them, and I heard her explain to the others: "It's about the experience. About taking classes from the teachers. About seeing the performances. About being in New York." Indeed.

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And despite its connections to the 'best' schools, companies, and dancers in the world, the nuts and bolts of the YAGP competition made the process and the competition itself look remarkably egalitarian.

Dancers have an air about them. It starts young, and is doubtless a product of stingy eating, rigorous training, and having a goal. Knowing that you're an object of adulation doesn't hurt either. And although a few of the YAGP finalists navigated the theater streets of New York looking like young royalty, the vast majority, when they were offstage, looked and acted like ordinary kids – whatever that is – albeit kids without an ounce of fat on their bodies.

But training (abetted by make-up and costumes) changes everything when they hit the stage. Except for certain precocious 'pre-competition' level 9-11 year olds, the 'performing age' appearance of the dancers, their stage maturity, was considerably older than their real age. Granted that each dancer could not have reached the New York finals without first having been selected from among other contestants in regional semi-finals, and that some of them were clearly a step ahead in terms of polish and consistency, not a single dancer I saw didn't belong here.

The competition is divided into groups by age and number of dancers: 'pre-competitive' solo (ages 9-11); junior solo (12-14); senior solo (15-19); pas de deux; and ensembles. The solos are further divided into male and female divisions, with each solo finalist dancing a classical and contemporary piece. The dancers perform one after another before a panel of approximately 15 judges, and an audience that ebbed and flowed with the category and time of day.

Except for omnipresent annoying and indiscriminate 'woops', and some overly enthusiastic childishness from certain spectators who were not children, the performances proceeded expeditiously, in businesslike fashion. After each presentation, each judge completed a form, from which the results were tabulated. I had no quarrel with the ultimate decisions. Of the dancers I saw, each of the 'winners' was among the upper tier of finalists. But how one remarkably talented and stage-savvy dancer could be selected over another from among the more accomplished entrants seems beyond simple calculation.

I see two potential areas of concern. First, the criteria for awarding scholarships and for determining winners are unstated (at least to non-participants). Consequently the award determinations – which dancers get scholarships; which are in the top group of finalists; who's a 'winner' – is at best confusing. For example, some scholarship grantees are not in the top group of finalists and vice versa; and winners don't correspond to the standing of the dancers in the top group of finalists. Although a lack of clearly defined standards may be a necessity since evaluations must to some extent be subjective, a little enlightenment would be helpful. I do note, though, that following the awards ceremony, each dancer received a packet containing his or her individual evaluations.

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The other area of concern is that among the judges, not only were there representatives of schools that are affiliated with professional companies, but there also were representatives from unaffiliated schools that funnel significant numbers of dancers into the competition. This carries the appearance of impropriety in two respects. This, theoretically, allows a school's representative to skew his or her evaluation in favor of that school's own competitors. More significantly, it looks like mutual backscratching – these unaffiliated schools award a sizable number of scholarships.

But such commentary from an outsider is undermined by the sense of camaraderie I gleaned from everyone involved; the fact that one judge's scoring, skewed or not, is only a drop in the collective evaluation bucket; and that all the schools participate to a greater or lesser extent in awarding scholarships. There was no sense of elitism or entitlement. On the contrary, and as Arthur Mitchell, former New York City Ballet principal and Dance Theater of Harlem founder, stated in one of the gala's introductory film clips, YAGP is "an opportunity for the global village of dance to come together."

By my rough count, there were over 100 winners of scholarships of varying lengths (e.g., one week summer; full summer intensive; full year) – although some of that number represent multiple scholarship awards to the same students. Certain contestants were also awarded studio and company contracts. For example, ABT's Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School offered (again by my unofficial count) 13 scholarships, and one studio company contract.

Of course, there were also YAGP competition award winners. 12 dancers or ensembles in each category were singled out as the 'top twelve (or, in the case of the male soloists, the top six), from which came the bronze, silver and gold medalists, and, with respect to the junior and senior soloist categories, an overall Grand Prix winner.

Tempting as it is, recognizing all the individual finalists I saw who for whatever reason stood out to me would be prohibitive – there were that many of them. But the medalists and top 12s are all listed on the YAGP website ([Youth America Grand Prix 2014 results](#)).

As various speakers recognized (including Sergei Filin, Director of the Bolshoi Ballet, who served as judge, coach, and speaker at a public interview prior to the closing gala), YAGP's rise to international prominence in a mere fifteen years has been extraordinary, and as audiences were constantly reminded, YAGP alumnae now populate companies throughout the world. Nevertheless, except for its breadth, it may be indistinguishable from other internationally prestigious dance competitions. But it is distinguishable in one significant way: it's ours.