



BWW Reviews: YOUTH AMERICA GRAND PRIX Comes of Age With Grace, Artistry, and Professionalism

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On the occasion of the 15th anniversary of Youth America Grand Prix, known to all as YAGP, the international competition founded by former Bolshoi principals Larissa and Gennadi Saveliev offered a three-evening celebration at the Koch from April 9th to 11th 2014 that completely converted this former naysayer into a diehard fan. All of my complaints from 2012 and 2013 have been addressed.

First of all, the tag line "Ensuring the Future of Dance" is now absolutely warranted. Although the young contestants still present impressive technique, the singular emphasis on tricks during previous years has evolved so that the kids

now show real artistry.

Second, the host for Thursday's "Stars of Today Meet the Stars of Tomorrow", Hilaria Baldwin, spoke only briefly and didn't go on and on with comic banter as did the hosts in previous years. Famously married to Alec Baldwin and the mother of their one-year-old daughter, she simply talked about her own dance training and her appreciation for the accomplishments of the YAGP entrants. Then she let the show go on. Brava!

Best of all, my peeve about the behavior of the young people in the audience has also been resolved. Yes, there was still some hooting and hollering for the pyrotechnics, but the volume was significantly subdued and the responses more selective. Even more gratifying, the student dancers in the audience showed real respect and attentiveness for the performances of the Stars of Today, many of whom are YAGP alums. The flat-out favorite of Thursday's line-up was a moving and flawless rendition of the "White Swan Pas de Deux" performed by Lucia Lacarra and Marlon Dino of the Bavarian State Ballet. Youngsters and adults alike rewarded the dancers with the most thunderous applause of the evening in spite of the fact that the choreography does not involve multiple turns or high-flying leaps or any of the other extreme moves that typically get the most enthusiastic ovations at these events.



Yet while I was delighted by the appropriate conduct of the young audience members, I can't say as much for some of the grown-ups. In spite of the theater's rule that the taking of photographs is not allowed, people hoisted their smartphones and blocked the view of the fans in the rows behind them. This transgression was especially annoying because the multi-million dollar renovation of the Koch unfortunately eliminated the slightly staggered placement of the seats with the result that audience members end up bobbing heads to the right or left in order to see what's happening. The errant photo-takers were oblivious to the fact that they were robbing their fellow dancegoers of some of the most magical moments on stage. Taps on the shoulders of the camera-wielding folks from those whose sightlines were being compromised went completely ignored. Aside from the appalling rudeness, I pity these people for whipping out their mobile devices rather than simply taking in a live performance without distracting themselves.

On a more upbeat note, the live performances were wonderful indeed. Special praise to 17-year-old scholarship winner David Fernando Navarro Yudes of the Academie Princess Grace **Monte Carlo** for his breathtaking and fiery version of the variation from "Don Quixote". Compliments also to 16-year-old winner Juliet Doherty from the San Francisco Ballet School for a standout presentation of the variation from "Grand Pas Classique".

Of the numerous professional pieces on Thursday and Friday, I was particularly taken by the world premiere of **Derek Hough's** stylish and jazzy "Ameska" featuring three male ballroom dancers and ABT's **Misty Copeland** on pointe, dazzling not only because of her glittery costume but because she has emerged as one of those rare artists capable of projecting across the footlights to the very back of the auditorium.



The two inventive works from MOMIX, the company of self-described "dancer-illusionists", were rightfully well received. "Millenium Skiva", in which the dancers maneuvered off-balance on skis, was performed by Steven Ezra and Nicole Loizides. She was one of my ballet students during her early years. I had lost touch so I PMed her on Facebook to let her know how proud I am. We are now digital "friends" to my great pleasure!

I was also charmed by NYCB's [Ashley Boudier](#) and the Bolshoi Ballet's Semyon Chuden in "La Sylphide", preceded by a film clip of the Bolshoi's artistic director Sergei Filin coaching the couple while wearing his now trademark dark glasses following the tragic acid attack. Filin, who has reportedly regained about 50% of the sight in his left eye, was on hand on Friday at 6 p.m. on the Koch promenade for a Q&A led by *Dance Magazine's* [Wendy Perron](#). Speaking through an interpreter, he was affable and animated with ready answers to questions about the direction the legendary Bolshoi is taking as the repertoire moves beyond the warhorses to include Balanchine staples as well as contemporary pieces. Perron wisely mentioned the attack only briefly in her introduction and then said she wanted to focus on the future. The attendees, including some of the students from the earlier rounds of the competition, clapped their approval for this decision and clearly appreciated Filin's courage and good humor.

Other notable performers were the two prodigies from the Juilliard School presented as part of YAGP's "Music Protegé Series", Elizabeth Aoki on the violin and Nadia Azzi at the piano; [Alicia Graf Mack](#) of [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater](#) and ABT's Daniil Simkin in Ailey's "Pas de Duke" to the music of [Duke Ellington](#); the Stuttgart's Evan McKie and the Bolshoi's [Olga Smimova](#) in the dramatic pas de deux from Cranko's "Onegin"; Brooklyn Mack from the Washington Ballet in Rastislav Zakarov's crowd-pleasing "Gopak" that had been Genadi Savlaiev's signature solo; and Iana Salenko from the Berlin State Ballet, Principal Guest Artist [Joseph Gatti](#), and Brooklyn Mack in the ultimate closer, the pas de trois from Petipa's "Le Corsaire".

However the real highlight for me, as in previous years, was Thursday's "Grande Défilé" with over 325 youngsters age 10 to 19 from six continents and 19 countries performing a remarkably clean and wonderfully effervescent ensemble piece. Here's a link to a [video](#) with snippets of the rehearsal process and the performance.



Congratulations to the Savaliev's for creating a true global community of ballet and offering opportunities for training and careers to so many deserving and gifted young dancers. Kudos also for putting together performances that featured both historical and current works, which helps to keep alive our art form that can only be preserved if each new generation dances and sees both the old and the new. Finally, thank you for the film clips of the professional dancers talking endearingly and candidly about their work, thus letting us view them as human beings with hopes and dreams and challenges.

May YAGP enjoy many more years of bringing together the worldwide dance community in the interest of giving the best of the up and coming talent pool the chance to receive the finest schooling available and the opportunity to join top companies. If you're in New York City next spring, be sure to see whatever YAGP will have in store for us in 2015. I have no doubt that it will be inspiring and memorable from start to finish.

Photo by Liza Voll Photography