

Youth America Grand Prix Scholarship Fundraiser: 'The Making of an Artist'

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Jerry Hochman

Youth America Grand Prix, which was founded in 1999 by former Bolshoi Ballet dancers Larissa and Gennadi Saveliev (the latter also a former American Ballet Theatre soloist), and which is now considered the world's largest student ballet scholarship competition, presented a special program last Monday at City Center (Studio 5) in Manhattan to raise funds to provide scholarships for student dancers. Approximately 150 of YAGP's patrons and closest friends attended the event, titled "The Making of an Artist." Volunteering their time to discuss their individual perceptions of what it means to be an artist and their own artistic developments, to demonstrate the creation of portions of a ballet, and to hobnob with those in attendance afterward, were ABT principal dancers Marcelo Gomes and James Whiteside, and soloist Misty Copeland.

The interviews were conducted with each dancer seriatim and led by YAGP Founding Board Chair Barbara Brandt. Beginning with Ms. Copeland and concluding with Mr. Gomes, the dancers were asked essentially identical questions, and the responses proved more interesting than the process would indicate, with each dancer not only personalizing his/her responses based on their relative status and experience, but also revealing distinctive personality traits. In the end, and consistent with YAGP's focus on individual dancer/students rather than just on the competition, the process humanized them.

For example, when asked for her definition of an artist, Ms. Copeland said 'Someone who can completely become in the moment on stage; who can completely let-go from the studio....to be completely free and vulnerable.' [The quotations here and below are excerpts from the full interviews. They reflect what my notes captured, but have been put in single quotes to indicate that some responses are condensations, and that I have not attempted to confirm the specific wording with any of the dancers.] Asked if the definition changes over time, she said that it does not, but "it grows stronger in different ways; the more experience you have, the more secure you are." Spoken like a soloist hungry for performing opportunities. And when asked how she interacts with a choreographer when preparing for a new ballet, she stated: "My belief is if the choreographer wants something, you give it to them...Our job is to do what the choreographer wants." Speaking of Alexei Ratmansky's "Firebird," she said 'Alexei is anal. He wants you to imitate exactly what he does...I was so crazy about doing it the way he wanted....' And although "he allowed us to make changes, I didn't change one step." She added that she 'keeps a role fresh because she's a perfectionist...[but] you have to find things you make a connection with.'

critical dance

Mr. Whiteside's definition of an artist was 'A person who can create something from nothing, and is able to see what they want to create....'and it changes over time 'as my awareness clarifies and I get older.' When asked about how he interacts with a choreographer, Mr. Whiteside, who was recently promoted to principal, was considerably more confident and aggressive than Ms. Copeland. He said 'If I feel terrible about something, I let the choreographer know....Making a new ballet is a collaboration between artists.' He said '...it's better to speak your mind.' But ultimately, 'even if it's tough (for the dancer), if the choreographer wants it then you shut your mouth and do it.' And he said he keeps a role fresh 'by bringing out the humanity in it....he's not refreshing a role, but he refreshes the human being behind the role....If I'm a happy person, then I'll be a happy dancer.'

Reflecting his level of experience as well as the personality I found during my interview with him last year, Mr. Gomes's definition of an artist was less a definition than an explanation. It 'takes time and experience to become an artist. You must be patient; be humble; stretch yourself and not be afraid to make mistakes.' And it changes over time: 'With more experience you see what's important...how you take a ballerina's hand, or do a double pirouette.' Tellingly, he said that he's only recognized himself as an artist a few times, in those rare performances 'when I can say I did everything I was meant to do.' And to keep a role fresh 'I think of a person sitting in the audience for the first time. I try to carry them through whatever journey it is; it's up to me to tell the story.' Asked if there's a type of emotion that's difficult for him to portray, he said it was comedy. 'I'm a romantic; I cry easily. Comedy is different; it's timing.' And he continually feels the need to refresh and reinvent himself. "I hope to forever grow," he said.

Following the conclusion of the interviews, Mr. Gomes, who has choreographed several pieces, demonstrated the artistic evolutionary process of creating choreographed phrases to tell a story - in this case excerpts reflecting a different take on the 'vision scene' from *The Sleeping Beauty*.

Ms. Brandt wrapped up the evening with a preview of YAGP's 2014 competition finals at the David H. Koch Theater beginning on April 3, the Final Round on April 9, followed by two gala performances: "The Stars of Today vs. The Stars of Tomorrow" on April 10, and its "Fifteenth Anniversary Gala" on April 11.