

The "Artist" Question

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James Whiteside in Le Corsaire. Photo by Gene Schiavone.

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What is an artist? It's one of those questions where few agree on the same answer. I probably change my own definition of the term every other week whenever I see something new that stretches my perspective.

Nonetheless, three top dancers from American Ballet Theatre—Misty Copeland, Marcelo Gomes and James Whiteside—will attempt to shed some light on the topic in a special event presented by [Youth America Grand Prix](#) next Monday at New York City Center studios. In addition to a discussion about what goes into the making of an artist, Gomes will also choreograph a new piece in real time on Copeland and Whiteside. In the meantime, we caught up with Whiteside to get his take on the topic.

In your view, what makes a dancer an artist?

Any dancer is an artist because we create something from nothing. Using only our minds and bodies, we become gods.

A former soloist with the Moscow Ballet, Strelnikova said that Grand Prix competition is a place where dreams come true for some young dancers. And it also gives them wonderful performance experience and a chance to train with masters.

A dancer since the age of 5, Strelnikova, who was born in Russia, said she told her students to enjoy their competition performances and then pay attention to every detail of the workshops.

“I said don’t worry about standing out in class,” she said. “I told them to be like a sponge.”

Strelnikova is artistic director of the Ballet Classique dance company, which is affiliated with a dance school in Middletown, N.J.

She said that only a special few will find their way into the spotlight in the disciplined, competitive world of ballet.

“They are going to have to reach,” she said, recalling her schooling in Russia. “They are going to have to have a certain talent ... and they are going to have to work really hard.”

She said that her students had a great experience in Providence, and that being on the stage of Veterans Auditorium had given the young dancers a taste of performing like professionals.

And although Strelnikova was seated more than a dozen rows back from the stage, it didn’t mean she could relax.

“Ballet is a passion,” Strelnikova said. “And sometimes, watching your dancers you find that you are squeezing your own body and toes — you want to help them that much.”