



BWW Dance Review: YAGP 2016 Was Better Than Ever at 'Ensuring the Future of Dance'

By Sondra Forsyth
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The 2016 season of Youth America Grand Prix (YAGP) culminated during three days in April at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). On April 27th, the Final Round of this celebrated international competition proved to be a heartening display of youthful promise. Then on April 28th and 29th, the "Stars of Today Meet the Stars of Tomorrow" Gala featured the 2016 YAGP finalists along with a roster of top-flight professionals. Several of the pros are former YAGP alumni, which validates YAGP's motto: "Ensuring the Future of Dance".

I was in the audience on the 27th and 28th. I found myself delighted with the fact that the new generation's high caliber of technique was matched by artistry beyond the young people's years. The Junior entrants, aged 12 to 14, and the Seniors, aged 15 to 19, all proved capable of both physical and emotional prowess. Some time ago in a review of YAGP, I lamented that YAGP showed off the kids' tricks at the expense of any artistic expression. How wonderful that this is no longer the case! During the Final Round, a four-hour marathon of ballet staples such as *La Esmeralda* and *Don Quixote* judged by a distinguished international panel of the ballet world's elite, one dancer after another delivered a superb performance on every level. (A young man from Kiev did stumble twice, but I believe he was flustered because of the long pause before his music began. The delay was due perhaps to a technical issue. He's a good dancer with a career in his future. He shouldn't be upset by his less-than-perfect performance.)

Speaking of technical issues, the Gala was a treat in terms of dance fare but stage crew glitches riddled the evening. Worst of all, an attempt at multi-media often failed miserably. Projections on an upstage screen, accompanied by elevator music that always ended jarringly mid-phrase, often didn't work properly. At several points while the techies tried to fix problems, the audience burst into laughter. What a shame to spoil the production with such amateurish shenanigans! Not only that, but the announcers often stumbled over the performers' names as well as the titles of the dances. At one point, painfully, an announcer intoned "Sho-peen-eh-ann-ah" when trying to say "Chopiniana". Ouch! Sorry, Chopin.

On the plus side, violin prodigy Elizabeth Aoki from the Juilliard Pre-College Division offered an astonishingly polished rendition of Paganini's *Capriccio No. 5* at the start of the evening while a video montage of YAGP rehearsals and backstage moments was projected on a screen behind her. That was one projection that, thankfully, went well. So did a touching video tribute to the late [Shelley King](#), YAGP's beloved Director of Operations for 12 years before her untimely death in 2015.

Another huge plus for this year's Gala was that hosts Angel Corella and [Irina Dvorovento](#) - storied former ABT principal dancers who have gone on to second careers -- were utterly charming. They proved to be a vast improvement over past hosts who knew nothing about dance and simply cracked irrelevant jokes.

As for the dancing, all of the finalists in the Gala were excellent. The pros were pretty terrific as well, although Hannah O'Neill and Hugo Marchand from the Paris Opera Ballet doing the pas de deux from *La Esmeralda* looked seriously jet-lagged. Hannah, a YAGP alum and now a principal dancer, is lovely. However, for some reason she didn't end the variation by hitting the iconic pose on one knee with an outstretched hand. She also fumbled the end of her fouetté sequence. Hugo had some missteps as well, and he didn't keep Hannah fully on balance during waist pirouettes. One YAGP alum who did dazzle the audience was Michaela DePrince. As every balletomane knows, she was a Sierra Leone orphan before her American family adopted her. Today she is a member of the Dutch National Ballet. She danced Balanchine's *Tarantella* with another YAGP alum and fellow company member Edo Wijnen. They won us over with their flawless footwork and saucy personalities in this joyous crowd-pleaser. I was brought to happy tears seeing Michaela as a professional ballerina.

Yet the highlight of the YAGP Gala, as always, was the Grand Défilé with hundreds of youngsters from around the world gracing the stage together in an immaculate ensemble piece they learned during only a few practice sessions. Even the nine-year-olds invariably shine. This year was no exception. The future of dance certainly does seem to be ensured.

A final note, one that underscores my point about the future of dance: After both performances, I was on the subway from Brooklyn back to Manhattan with many of the baby bunheads and their parents traveling the same route. The youngsters were still aglow from the excitement of what they had seen or performed. They were studying the playbill while reading it aloud to one another and chattering away in various languages. The scene on the #3 Manhattan bound train from Brooklyn's Nevins Street Station felt like an afterparty for YAGP 2016 during which the "Stars of Tomorrow" shared their passion. May all of their dancing dreams come true!

Photo courtesy of the Youth America Grand Prix Facebook page