



Australian Makensie Henson, performing her solo from 'The Pharaoh's Daughter'.

# HUNDREDS OF STARS

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IKE most things American, the Youth America Grand Prix is not just big – it's supersized. Started by former Bolshoi dancers Larissa and Gennadi Saveliev on their credit card 17 years ago, the competition this year involved more than 8000 students, with auditions being held throughout the US and other locations, including China. From these the best were chosen to participate in the finals in NYC – this year there were nearly a thousand of them (including the group and duo sections). "If I had known when I started this competition how big and complicated it would become, I probably would not have done it," Larissa declared to me, her black eyes sparkling, nonetheless, with enthusiasm.

In style YAGP is somewhere between the Prix de Lausanne in Switzerland and your ordinary Australian ballet "comp". Whereas the Prix de Lausanne is aimed at more senior, pre-professional vocational students, YAGP caters to competitors aged from nine to 19, mostly from private schools. It includes sections for groups and pas de deux and a pre-competitive level for those under twelve. The solo awards are judged on the performance of one contemporary and one classical solo. Classwork, though provided, is not included in the assessment. There is a rotating panel of nearly 30 judges, each from a major school or company, who are also effectively talent scouts offering scholarships.

Like at the Prix de Lausanne, these scholarships are the big drawcard. However, at the Prix de Lausanne the prize winners

**Karen van Ulzen**  
went to the  
Youth America  
Grand Prix – and  
was dazzled by  
the galaxy of  
talent on show.

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Winner of the Grand Prix  
(senior) Joonhyuk Jun:  
outstanding from the start.

## RESULTS

The Grand Prix (senior award) went to **Joonhyuk Jun** (17), a South Korean studying at the Royal Ballet School in London.

The men's senior section was won by **Narciso Alejandro Medina Arias** from Cuba. Second went to **Stanislaw Wegrzyn**, from the Ballett-Akademie Hochschule for Musik und Theater in Germany, and third to **Motomi Kiyota**, from Japan.

In the women's senior section (12 to 15 years) the winner was **Yu Hang** (16) from China. Second place went to **Thays Golz** (18) from Brazil, and third place went to Australian **Makensie Henson** (15), a pupil of Prudence Bowen Atelier. The junior boys' category was won by **Itsuku Masuda** (12) from Japan. Second place was shared by **Samuel Gest** (14) from the US and **David Perez** (12) from Mexico. Third place was also shared: by **Yago Guerra** (14) from Brazil and **Sheung-Yin Chan** (14) from Hong Kong.

The women's junior section was won by **Ashley Lew** (12), from the US, while second went to **Eri Shibata** (14) from Japan and third place was shared by **Kotomi Yamada** (13) from Japan and **Bridgid Walker** (14) from the US. The Junior Grand Prix for Best overall went to **Antonio Casalinho** (12) from Portugal. Again, he was a clear winner, with very advanced technique and maturity for his age.

Makensie was the only Australian to receive a medal but some were offered scholarships. **Talia Fidra**, from Classical Coaching Australia, has been invited for a year to the Houston Ballet Academy, **Amia Mason** (from Regional Academy of Performing Arts) has been offered a place to the Academy of Performing Arts in Munich, and **Layla Maxine Burgess**, from the Annette Roselli Dance Academy, has been offered a professional contract with the American Ballet Theatre studio company.

**Madison Ayton**, also from Annette Roselli, came in the top 12 junior women.

New Zealander **Lilly Maskery**, from the Philippa Campbell School of Ballet, also has an offer to go to Munich and **George Liang**, presently at the NZ School of Dance, received a trainee award from the Joffrey Academy of Dance in the US.



Senior women's  
winner Yu Hang.

choose which scholarship they want; at YAGP the judges choose which students they want. "Like shopping," laughs Larissa.

The first rounds of the finals are held at the Skirball Centre for the Performing Arts, which is owned by New York University and situated in picturesque Greenwich Village. (It is right next door to the Judson Church, the birthplace of American post-modern dance.) I arrived in time to see the classical solos. The contestants were whipped through at a cracking pace, with each being introduced almost before the previous one has left the stage. Esmeraldas, Corsaires, Bayaderes, peasant girls and Auroras had each just a few minutes in the spotlight. A shoe came off, a ribbon end showed, a few fumbled. But overall, the standard was incredible.

When watching competitions, I put a tick beside the names of the ones I think are good, two ticks by those who are outstanding. By the end of the first group of 50, I had so many ticks and double ticks that I had to revise my rating system! They all had beautiful physiques, including lovely legs and feet. All had uniformly high extensions and excellent technique. I was

“The best talent we see comes from Brazil and Australia. Absolutely.”

astonished at the fearless brilliance of their pirouettes. Most could knock off a triple as a minimum. I wondered how the judges could pick their finalists. To stand out from this remarkable line-up really required something special. As if to confirm my feelings, the number of finalists, when announced, was still very large – about 85 dancers divided between the boys' and girls' senior and junior sections.

To make their assessment, the judges mark the dancers by numbers out of 100 (minimum score of 85) for different aspects of technique. The figures are fed into a computer. "We are sometimes surprised ourselves at who comes out on top," one judge told me.

But some did stand out right from the beginning.

Joonhyuk Jun, who was awarded the Senior Grand Prix (for best overall), was a clear winner.

New Zealand's  
Lily Maskery.



Performing the variation from *La Bayadere*, he has a huge, thrilling jump, leaping up into the air like an Olympic high jumper, and a very mature style. It is hard to believe he is still a student. Similarly mature was the winner of the Junior Grand prix, Antonio Casalinho (12) from Portugal. This midget Baryshnikov stunned the audience with his *Corsaire* variation, performing incredible turns (I counted at least six turns per pirouette) and a pleasing, vigorous style. His determination to be the best showed in his every move. I also loved Isuku Masuda, who won the junior boy's section with an exciting but elegant *Bayadere* solo, and an astonishing menage of double sautebasques.

The girls were harder to choose between. I loved the third placed junior girl Kotomi Yamada, who gave a dazzling performance of the *Esmeralda* solo, cheerfully kicking her tambourine with her foot above her head with both height and control.

Of the senior girls, Australian Makensie Henson showed enviable legs and feet and neat turns in her solo from *The Pharaoh's Daughter*, deserving her third placing. The winner, Yu Hang, again performing *Esmeralda*, not only had the requisite high legs and astonishing multiple pirouettes, but danced with her entire body, as if the difficult moves came to her as naturally as breathing. I thought Australian Madison Ayton might win a prize, as she had the confident attack and secure turns that marked out the top echelon of contestants. She was the only other Australian to make it into the top 12 in that section.

Many scholarships were offered, including to Australians Talia Fidra, from Classical Coaching Australia, and Amia Mason, from Regional Academy of Performing Arts. Layla Maxine Burgess (19), from Annette Roselli Dance Academy, received a traineeship with American Ballet Theatre Studio Company.

YAGP is unquestionably of extremely high calibre – of both contestants and judging personnel. However, competitions of this structure that use only solos as the means of demonstrating talent are controversial in that the dancers are judged on just a few steps in which they have probably been coached for months, if not years. They are not a fair representation of the contestant's full ability.

They produce the rather freakish sight of teenage dancers performing solos that are usually considered the preserve of the most senior ballerinas – and possibly performing them better. But grooming students to perform a pitch-perfect solo is not adequate preparation for career in a ballet company and gives a misleading example to both the students and their parents. So, as exciting as this competition is, it should be taken as just one part of a dancer's overall training, not the final aim.

Larissa Saleviev is aware of the dangers of competitions. In the first years of the competition she had to persuade reputable teachers that YAGP was not some, as she says, "cheesy comp". Now many of those teachers are enthusiastic participants. "They understand the value – not just in competing but in giving kids a goal. The process of preparing is a good reason [to take part]. Our main goal is to find talent. We go to places to find talent."

One of those places is soon to be Australia. "We see kids from China, Brazil, Mexico, Europe. The best talent we see comes from Brazil and Australia," she says emphatically. "Absolutely." For that reason, she is already in the process of setting up semifinals in Australia, hopefully to start in 2018. The venue is still to be decided, but will most likely be in either Melbourne or Brisbane.

Start practising those pirouettes! ↗

Layla Burgess, who has won a traineeship with American Ballet Theatre.

