



Ellis Derrick



Sarah Schafer

YAGP in Paris

EMMA KAULDHAR reports on this year's European semi-finals



Antonio Casalinho

To compete or not? There are two camps - one in favour of the benefits young dancers can gain and the other against any involvement in ballet competitions. "Ballet is an art, not sport," the latter will rightly mutter, but there are competitions and competitions. Some are indeed pretty shameless medal/trophy/cash-pursuing affairs, whereas others have resolutely stood the test of time, and many leading dancers in the world today have benefited from their participation in the likes of the Youth America Grand Prix, the Prix de Lausanne and many other reputable events around the world. Whilst taking part in any competition does not come without its stresses, frustrations and disappointments, the experience is unquestionably good for toughening the skin - a necessity for anyone hoping to make it as a professional dancer. It is perhaps also worth noting that dancers' biographies inevitably list competition prizes but

rarely - if ever - include examination successes.

From quite modest beginnings 17 years ago, the YAGP has morphed into a global phenomenon - becoming more of a movement than a mere competition. Prizes mostly come in the form of scholarships, and, of course, the schools themselves compete amongst each other to entice the most promising dancers. This is perhaps why some of the top schools shy away from encouraging their students to compete - they don't want to lose their star pupils to another institution.

Beginning a few years ago, the European semi-finals are relatively new, but this year's event, held at the Théâtre André Malraux in Rueil Malmaison on the outskirts of Paris, attracted young hopefuls from 27 countries. Doubtless a big draw is the chance not only to compete in the competition, but also to participate in the classes and workshops held by the Paris Opera School, whose director Elisabeth Plateel generously



Kirica Takahashi. Photos: Emma Kauldhar

and graciously plays a significant role in the running of the event. With numerous categories, the Paris event ran for four days, but my main interest was in watching those young dancers whose potential to become professional ballet dancers was apparent. Naturally, with the huge number of contestants, there are many for whom a career in dance is clearly not on the cards, and one should perhaps not be too harsh on those who choose to dance as a hobby rather than a lifetime commitment. Let's remember also that the study of dance is a beneficial discipline that can prove advantageous in many different fields. It's unfortunate that some teachers still try to push their pupils way beyond their abilities. It really cannot be much fun trying to muscle through *Grand Pas Classique* at 14 years of age when the act of getting up on to pointe is still requiring Herculean effort. That is not to say that dancers should not strive to be better, but really the challenges need to be addressed in the studio - not on the stage, where ineptness is cruelly exposed and open to ridicule.

A general criticism this year is feet, far too many of which were seen dangling haplessly on the ends of hyperextensions. The fashion to whack the leg up to 12 o'clock regardless has unfortunately had a negative effect on feet, which many young dancers appeared to have completely forgotten.

So to the competitors, starting with the ladies in the Senior Classical category, and good to report that two of the Top 12 came from the UK. Ellis Derrick (15), a student at the Linda Lowry School of Ballet in Glasgow, showed technical accomplishment in each of the three solos she presented, but perhaps needs to work on developing a stronger stage personality, while Kirica Takahashi (15), studying at the Elmhurst School for Dance, demonstrated absolute control coupled with an engaging quality in both her *Sleeping Beauty* and *Shade* variations and scooped the second place. Also in this group, two young dancers from Italy: Giovanna Doria (15) from Happy Dance di Irina Pana won me over with her precision and joie de vivre, and Alessia Ceccarelli



Giovanna Doria



Elena Iseki



Alessia Ceccarelli

SENIOR WOMEN - CLASSICAL

- 1st Sarah Schafer (Ballet-Akademie Hochschule für Musik und Theater)
 2nd Kirica Takahashi (Elmhurst School for Dance)
 3rd Luisa Solowjowa (Vienna State Opera Ballet Academy)

SENIOR MEN - CLASSICAL

- 1st Can Alcicek (Dokuz Eylül University State Conservatory)
 2nd Théo Just (Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et Danse de Paris)
 3rd (tie) Max Ossenbergs-Engels (Ballet-Akademie Hochschule für Musik und Theater) and Ali Eren Topcu (Dokuz Eylül University State Conservatory)

JUNIOR WOMEN - CLASSICAL

- 1st Elena Iseki (Berlin State Ballet School)
 2nd Teresa Borges (Oporto Ballet School - Espaço Dança)
 3rd (tie) Adriana Cipriano (Oporto Ballet School - Espaço Dança) and Miri Lapidus (Jerusalem Ballet School)

JUNIOR MEN - CLASSICAL

- 1st Antonio Casalinho (Annarella Academia de Ballet e Dança)
 2nd Federico Aramu (Vienna State Opera Ballet Academy)
 3rd Francisco Gomes (Annarella Academia de Ballet e Dança)

For a complete list of the Paris winners please visit www.yagp.org

(15), from Laboratorio Danza & Teatro, oozed with confidence in her flighty Kitri solo. Her innate fearlessness will take her far. Also noteworthy was the beautifully trained Nerea Barrondo Aguado (18) from the Bolshoi Ballet Academy in Moscow, who performed with professional elan, and Luisa Solowjowa (16), from the Vienna State Opera Ballet Academy, who was placed third for her bold, generous dancing. The first place in this category was deservedly given to Sarah Schafer (19), a student at the Ballett-Akademie Hochschule für Musik und Theater, who enchanted with her beautifully etched Medora variation.

The men in the Senior Classical category were, alas, not a patch on the women, in that the ingredients were there but the technique, presentation and facial expressions rarely gelled together. However, two young men, both studying at the Dokuz Eylül University State Conservatory, gave committed performances and made their mark: Can Alcicek (16) was placed first and Ali Eren Topcu (16) tied third with Max Ossenbergs-Engels (18), from the Ballett-Akademie Hochschule für Musik und Theater. The second place went to Théo Just (16) from the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et Danse de Paris, who presented an impassioned *Flames of Paris*.

The Junior Classical category offered many promising young dancers, and particularly impressive were a number of students from the Annarella Academia de Ballet e Dança in Portugal. Among them, Antonio Casalinho (12), who was placed first in the group, was exceptional and demonstrated a technical ease way beyond his years, and Francisco Gomes (12) likewise delivered a fine performance. A mention also for João Gomes (14) who, although



Can Alcicek

not placed, gave a commendable performance. Second in this group was Federico Aramu (13) from the Vienna State Opera Ballet Academy, whose clean split jeté was impressive.

Of the younger women, the first prize was awarded to Elena Iseki (14), from the Berlin State Ballet School, whose *Harlequinade* variation was danced with confidence and charm, and the second prize went to Teresa Borges (12) from the Oporto Ballet School Espaço Dança, who gave a wonderful rendition of *Esmeralda*. From the same school, Adriana Cipriano (12), shared third place with Miri Lapidus (14), a proficient turner, from the Jerusalem Ballet School.

With the huge turnout at this year's European semi-finals it is likely that a second city in Europe will also be a host next year.