

Before They Were Stars, They Won YAGP

Posted on [April 26, 2016](#) by [Jennifer Stahl](#)

Throw together a night of performances by international dancers, sprinkle in some teenage competition winners' solos, and call it something cute: That would seem to be the recipe for Youth America Grand Prix's "[Stars of Today Meet the Stars of Tomorrow](#)" gala, happening this Thursday and Friday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Except, the name of this annual program is eerily prescient. When you look back at the lists of YAGP medalists from the past 15 years, that "Stars of Tomorrow" moniker is spot-on. They read like something of a Who's Who of ballet—including several top names who've been highlighted in *Dance Magazine*.

Back in 2002, [Sarah Lane](#) nabbed the senior bronze medal with an unforgettable performance: After her music stopped 20 seconds into her *Paquita* variation, she finished the rest in silence. In the audience (which erupted into a spontaneous standing ovation) was American Ballet Theatre artistic director Kevin McKenzie. We ended up putting Lane on *Dance Magazine's* cover in June 2007 just before he promoted her to soloist. Jim Nowakowski won the Youth Grand Prix in 2002 before joining Houston Ballet, then took a star turn on "So You Think You Can Dance." We named him one of *Dance Magazine's* "[25 to Watch](#)" this year. That same year, [Brooklyn Mack](#) placed third in the classical dance category for senior men. Today, he's a standout dancer at The Washington Ballet, and partnered Misty Copeland in her first U.S. performance of *Swan Lake*.

[Hee Seo](#) took the Grand Prix in 2003. She would later become one of ABT's classiest principals, gracing our May 2013 cover.

[Whitney Jensen](#) [January 201](#) won the gold medal among the junior women in 2005. She appeared on *DM's* 2010 "25 to Watch" cover with Broadway's William Wingfield. After reaching the rank of principal at Boston Ballet, she recently joined Norwegian National Ballet.

[Joseph Gorak](#) already flaunted crystal clean technique when he tied for the Grand Prix in 2006. He now partners leading ladies like Misty Copeland and Isabella Boylston as a soloist at ABT.

Before he became the "bad boy of ballet," [Sergei Polunin](#) also shared the 2006 Grand Prix by showing off his eye-popping, rockstar style. After infamously walking out on his principal career at The Royal Ballet, he's now a guest soloist with the Stanislavsky Theater in Russia and also partnering/dating Natalia Osipova.

Although she was more often seen at competitions like New York City Dance Alliance and Showstopper, Dusty Button won the bronze medal for classical dance among the seniors at YAGP in 2006. [She told us last July](#) that she feels her competitive sensibility was what helped her become a principal at Boston Ballet so quickly.

After winning the [Grand Prix in 2007](#), [Melissa Hamilton](#) joined The Royal Ballet. She's currently taking a two-season leave of absence to stretch her contemporary skills as a principal with Dresden Semperoper Ballet.



June 2007



May 2013

A tiny Catherine Hurlin won the “Hope Award” in the pre-competitive division in 2008 (see her incredible contemporary performance at 7:52 in this video). Although she’s still in ABT’s corps, she’s already made a name for herself as one of its most talented up-and-comers.

I remember being backstage in 2010 when Hannah O’Neill won the gold medal among the seniors (see her variation at minute 4:53 in the video below). Her old-fashioned grace was stunning; it’s no wonder Benjamin Millepied promoted her to first soloist at Paris Opéra Ballet this season. This week, she’ll be performing at YAGP’s gala as one of the “Stars of Today.”

Hannah Bettes took the gold medal among the junior women in the classical dance category in 2011 (see her charming *Coppélia* variation at 1:54). Today she’s turning heads at Boston Ballet.

Kimin Kim won the Grand Prix in 2012 before becoming principal at the Mariinsky Ballet. Of course, this is only a small list of the many former YAGP winners who’ve gone on to have amazing dance careers. And that’s what’s so exciting: You never know where those “Stars of Tomorrow” might go.



July 2015



Melissa Hamilton at
YAGP 2007