

# The Sydney Morning Herald



Harrison Lee, 16, won the \$18,000 McDonald's Ballet Scholarship at the Sydney Eisteddfod. *Photo: Nic Walker*

## Young eisteddfod finalists the future of Australian ballet

Juliana Yu

Published: August 9, 2015 - 12:00AM

When Harrison Lee says he was "quite shocked" at being announced winner of the McDonald's Ballet Scholarship at the Sydney Eisteddfod there's a strong sense it's modesty, not honesty, that's talking.

Not that anyone would blame the 16-year-old schoolboy from Castle Hill for being confident, having also won top honours at the Prix de Lausanne and the Youth America Grand Prix, two of the most prestigious ballet competitions for young dancers internationally.

The \$18,000 scholarship will help when he jets off to London to attend the illustrious Royal Ballet School in September.

Harrison, who has been labelled "Australia's Billy Elliot" in just about every piece of press he has ever featured in, admits that ballet isn't just leisure anymore, it's also work.

"It's definitely become a little bit of both [leisure and work], but I do enjoy the work aspect of it, going into the studio every day and continuously refining my technique," he says.

Harrison and his fellow eisteddfod finalists – Katherine Sonnekus, 15, Brayden Gallucci, 16, and Emma Antrobus, 16 – are being touted as the future faces of Australian ballet.

"Many of the dancers seen at last weekend's competition will go far, they may go further afield to train and have international careers," says David McAllister, the artistic director of the Australian Ballet and an eisteddfod judge.

He described Harrison as an "extraordinary talent – one that is hard to ignore".

"It's not enough for a dancer to know all of the special trick moves – they have to have control in their movement and an intelligence behind their dancing," he says.

Emma is also departing in September to train at the Hochschule Ballett-Akademie in Munich, Germany.

"Leaving my family behind will be hard but it's an amazing opportunity to be able to study and do what you love as a career," she says, "I'm so excited and overwhelmed."

The world of professional ballet is notoriously competitive, and Katherine hadn't considered that she could study overseas or make a career of it until being named runner-up last weekend.

"I honestly didn't even think I had a chance, but now I'm feeling much more confident so I might apply for a few schools –I'd be happy to be accepted anywhere," she says.

The boys are a little more straightforward with their ambitions.

"My ultimate goal is to dance as a soloist or principal in a company and travel the world as a ballet dancer," says Brayden, who shared the eisteddfod's Australian Conservatoire of Ballet Performance Award with Lee.

Lucinda Dunn, former principal dancer of the Australian Ballet and Katherine's teacher, hopes to see more young talent return to our shores.

"I feel that too many of these special students head overseas and remain in companies for their entire careers," she said.

"Australia produces so much talent and I've felt for years that the Australian Ballet does not always get the pick of the crop."

Both Dunn and McAllister agree that a mastery of technique alone does not guarantee stardom, it's a combination of aesthetics, determination and a "special spark".

However, big wins also come with big expectations.

When asked what attracted her to ballet, Katherine gives a self-aware laugh.

"Oh no, here come the corny lines," she says.

"When I dance, I don't have to speak or pretend to be anything I don't want to be – I can just get lost in the music and be released from reality."

Emma, however, puts it slightly differently.

"Being on stage, you get this really disgusting feeling in your stomach, like you feel sick and it's gross at first but then suddenly it's like ah! – it's hard to describe but it's a feeling that I just love."