

Ballet dancers on the rise

By Deborah Sullivan Brennan | 12:40 p.m. Jan. 27, 2016



Young dancers (from left) Malena Ani, Scarlet Wang and Jordan Coutts warm up while waiting for their turn at the 2013 competition. — Howard Lipin

More than 300 aspiring dancers will vie for scholarships and jobs with top dance companies this weekend through an international competition described as “a sort of Olympics of classical ballet.”

The Youth America Grand Prix 2016 semifinals, held Friday and Saturday at Mater Dei Catholic High School in Chula Vista, are all-day contests for ballet hopefuls ages 9 to 19. It’s one of a series of semifinals held throughout the U.S. and other countries.

The competitors aim to place in national finals in New York and, from there, get into prestigious training programs and apprenticeships with companies such as American Ballet Theatre, the New York City Ballet and the Paris Opera Ballet. Among the contest’s alumni is Scout Forsythe, a San Diego native who earned an apprenticeship with American Ballet Theatre through the contest and now dances in the company’s corps de ballet.

The competition, now in its 17th year, was founded by Larissa Saveliev and her husband, Gennadi Saveliev, former dancers with Russia’s Bolshoi Ballet, to introduce promising ballet students to professional companies. Besides opening those doors for future dancers, the contest offers a window through which the public can view classical and contemporary performances by dancers of various levels.

“The audience will see a lot of beautiful dance, in all forms,” said Billie Buddenhagen, regional director for the competition. “It’s a great way to expose your children, if they’re interested in dance.” The performances run from

morning to night, for roughly 12 hours each day, she said. Visitors can drop in at any time and stay for as long as they like to watch the series of 2^{1/2}-minute performances. “There are a lot of variations, including classical variations from Swanhilda, ‘The Nutcracker,’ ‘Paquita,’ ‘Esmeralda,’” Buddenhagen said. “You will see all the classics performed.”

Competitors are grouped into three age classes; some younger participants will represent beginning dance levels, while many older contestants showcase pre-professional dance abilities. “We have various skill levels,” Buddenhagen said. “Registration is open to everyone. There’s a place for everyone. Everyone should have the opportunity to dance.”

In addition to the opportunity to earn scholarships and job contracts, participants get feedback on their performances. Even those who don’t place will walk away with valuable advice, she said. “You learn from the judges’ notes,” Buddenhagen said. “You take their notes and corrections and apply that to your training. It’s just a great resource for them.” Dancers can also join in master classes after the competition. “So they have the opportunity to take classes from these fabulous dancers and teachers from around the world, from different companies,” she said.