

Tampa native among 'Stars of Tomorrow' at ballet competition



Now a record number of students will arrive at the David A. Straz Center for the Performing Arts today through Sunday for a chance to impress judges, win scholarships, watch professionals dance in the *Stars of Today Meet the Stars of Tomorrow Gala* performance and meet fellow dancers who will travel from all over the state to compete in the semifinals.

The growth may even affect the competition schedule.

"Usually Sunday is all about the master classes, but this year I believe they are squeezing competition in on Sunday as well," said Phillip Neal, artistic director for Next Generation Ballet and chair of the dance department. Luckily, the Straz Center is one of the larger venues where the competition is held. "This year, we have 340 students enrolled. It just keeps growing," said Billie Buddenhagen, regional director for the grand prix.

Of those enrolled, 125 come from the Straz Center's own Next Generation Ballet program. For one of those students, Tessa Hartmann, 15, this will be her third time at the Youth American Grand Prix. She's even traveled to New York to compete in the grand prix finals. "It's hard to ignore her remarkable ballet facility, it's textbook perfect," Neal said. "She hasn't been doing classical ballet all that long either, and condensed a lot into a couple of years."

Hartmann, a Tampa native, began dancing at age 11 when she enrolled in a summer program at the Straz Center. "The training we have here has contributed to my success so far," Hartmann said. "We get to perform so much," Hartmann said. Practicing six days a week, Hartmann's whole life consists mainly of dance and school. She is enrolled in Florida Virtual. Her schedule became so rigorous, rehearsing simultaneously for *The Nutcracker* and the Youth American Grand Prix, as well as the Prix de Lausanne, which takes place in Switzerland, Neal had to pull back her hours. Though she remains busier than most of her friends, her hard work shows. "What I found so

refreshing from seeing her in *The Nutcracker*, for a 15 year old girl she had a good sense of who she was on stage," Neal said. "She looked like a 15 year old girl, but also glamorous and mature. It's hard to find a balance of true adolescence and a sense of maturity. It will serve her well."

Though Neal now prepares his students, most of whom have attended a Youth American Grand Prix competition previously, he used to sit at the judges table. "With Phillip Neal being the new head, we are thrilled to be working with him in his new world and happy to have him on the other side," Buddenhagen said. Neal takes what he's learned as a judge to help his students. "It's a matter of opinion," Neal said. "You have different judges in different cities and the dancers have to have tough skin. I have to reinforce that a lot, not to shed too many tears."

Unlike many competitions, a majority of this one is based on potential. "I think YAGP is the leading organization of its kind because you don't have to be a winner or place to get the opportunity for a scholarship or job offer," said Skylar Brandt, 23, a past YAGP silver medalist and one of the *Stars of Today Meet the Stars of Tomorrow Gala* performers. Though seeing the judges can be stressful for dancers, it's watching their peers that cause the most nerves. "Don't watch the people before you, that kind of freaks me out," Hartmann said of what she's learned from past experiences. Though her nerves may be high during her contemporary and two classical solos, she is excited to see the professionals. "Watching professional dancers in the gala, just having them here is really cool," Hartmann said.

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