

Young dancer taking leap into world of professional ballet

Vancouver native eyeing the crown at international contest



Vancouver native Derek Drilon, currently between gigs with the Joffrey and Boston Ballet companies, will dance with his home school, Northwest Classical Ballet, on June 18. (Courtesy of Northwest Classical Ballet)

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Published: June 10, 2016, 6:04 AM

It's good to be the prince.

"I like playing princely roles. It feels pretty natural to me," said Derek Drilon, 19.

That makes sense. At age 19, the Vancouver native recently assumed a position of young royalty in the largest international dance competition in the world.

The Youth America Grand Prix draws thousands of aspiring ballet dancers to regional semi-final competitions in cities all over the world, where professional judges evaluate each dancer's performance, potential and artistry. Finalists are invited to New York City for the final contest, with prizes of scholarship money to the world's leading dance academies and the invaluable contacts and connections that follow.

Drilon won the semi-final Grand Prix Award in Chicago and was named one of the top six men in the New York finals, for his performance of the Siegfried Variation from “Swan Lake.”



In Tchaikovsky’s ballet, Prince Siegfried is enraptured with a woman who has been transformed into a swan — but then falls under the spell of a pretender, with tragic consequences. The prince’s famously expressive solo dance, as he considers his predicament and his passion, require great power and artistry.

Comedy is a whole different challenge. Drilon said he recently danced the role of Franz, who falls in love with a doll in a comic ballet called “Copp?lia,” and found the broad pantomime required by that role a new and interesting test. “It was really fun. But it took some getting used to,” he said.

That was with the Long Beach Ballet in California, where Drilon has appeared as a guest artist several times. He’s also danced with the American Ballet Theater in New York and the Joffrey Ballet’s Studio Company — an exclusive group of students who train alongside the professional dancers of the Joffrey, in Chicago, and appear in some Joffrey performances. And Drilon will join the Boston Ballet for its upcoming 2016-17 season.

“Derek is zooming forward with ballet,” said David Wilcox, the artistic director of the Long Beach Ballet. “Derek is totally ambitious about being a professional ballet dancer.”

But first, a quick visit home. You’ll be able to check out Drilon’s growing mastery June 18 as he dances with Northwest Classical Ballet, the group that gave him his start. Northwest Classical, located in Salmon Creek, was founded by Drilon’s mother, Maricar, who remains artistic director there.

At 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. June 18, Drilon will dance with Northwest Classical as it presents “Cinderella,” “Under the Moonlight” and new works.

Philippine connection

The unlikely backstory of this family’s growing ballet legend goes all the way back to World War II and the Philippines. It was the wife of an American soldier stationed there, likely an officer, who took a notion to start teaching young Filipinos about ballet. One of those young students was Derek Drilon’s grandmother, Mercedes, and she grew up to become a ballet teacher who instructed her own daughter, Maricar.

And Maricar Drilon became a principal dancer with Ballet Philippines, a premiere professional company in that nation; she danced all around the world and with various companies in the U.S. before settling down in Vancouver to start a dance company with her (now ex-) husband and then her own school, Northwest Classical Ballet.

Derek said he started taking ballet lessons at Northwest Classical at 6 or 7 and started “getting serious” when he was about 14. But even with all his successes, it wasn’t until the last year or so that he realized he had something really special.

“I knew I loved to do this but I didn’t know I would be happy. It can be very intense. When you are the lead dancer, it’s mostly about trying not to let everybody down. You are the star performer. That’s a lot of pressure,” he said.

But it’s also really fun, he added. “I’ve made a lot of friends and I love traveling to different places,” he said.

He’s danced in China, France and Canada. He’s been to the Philippines several times, he said, and last summer he and his mother and Northwest Classical represented the U.S. at the first international choreographers festival, known as C-MAP, ever held in the Philippines.

“I’ve had my dreams, but I didn’t see myself getting this far, to be honest,” he said. “It’s all very amazing.”