

# Trending Now: #Competitions

How has the rising popularity of competitions affected the concert-dance world?

## A disembodied voice calls out a number

name, age and title of the dance. Out of the wings comes an expert strut of lanky limbs and big pointe-shoed feet as an adolescent dancer begins her solo. Maybe it's Kitri's sassy Act III variation or perhaps some hypermobile contemporary choreography to the latest pop ballad. Either way, the stakes for this young dancer are incredibly high: Sitting in the audience alongside nervous parents, tense teachers and a table of judges are the artistic directors of major dance companies, who've come to scout for fresh talent.

While competitions are certainly not new to the dance world, they are now taken more seriously than ever as part of a dancer's training. It is no longer possible for traditional dance schools to turn their noses up at competitions where top ballet and modern companies routinely hand out scholarships and contracts—Youth America Grand Prix, for one, estimates that over 500 of its alumni are now dancing in 80 companies around the world. More dancers from competitions/conventions such as New York City Dance Alliance and JUMP are now finding professional homes in companies such as Batsheva Dance Company, Dresden Semperoper Ballett, Azure Barton & Artists and Boston Ballet. Not only are competitions now a place for dancers to be seen early in their pre-professional career, these contests are also giving concert-dance companies that special something: bold dancers who can do it all. ▶

Backstage at Youth  
America Grand  
Prix finals

“These dancers have an indomitable will and a sense to just get out there,” says Ballet West artistic director Adam Sklute, who routinely scouts for dancers at The Music Center’s Spotlight Awards, YAGP, World Ballet Competition and USA IBC in Jackson. About a quarter of his company members have come through competition channels. “I look for young students who are fearless and I follow their progression over a number of years.”

Coached from a young age to perform virtuosic tricks and pushed to command a stage, competition dancers tend to exhibit a precocious confidence that sets them apart from students who develop in the more traditional dance school format of humbly honing technique before performing regularly. “I think a lot of competition dancers come into companies day one with verve and fire,” says Desmond Richardson, co-artistic director of Complexions Contemporary Ballet, which launched the new Élite Dance Tournament this year in conjunction with the Joffrey Ballet School in New York City. Even though former competitors’ stage presence can sometimes look exaggerated, Richardson says it’s typically easier for artistic staff to tone down dancers’ performance quality rather than turn it up later.

**But how does all of this spirited willfulness work out** when it moves into the more understated world of a corps de ballet or ensemble? Many young dancers experience a learning curve when they have to adjust to working in groups and learning to match their peers instead of stealing the show in just one solo. There can sometimes be a culture clash between competition dancers and their non-competition peers. After competing at events like Showbiz National Talent and LA Dance Magic, Ida Saki remembers feeling somewhat looked down upon as a “trickster with no artistry” when she first transferred to a performing arts high school where competitions weren’t the norm. However, when she later joined Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet, though she sometimes wished she had more training in strict ballet, she often felt she had an advantage with choreographers who saw her as more adventurous about taking on foreign movement vocabularies.

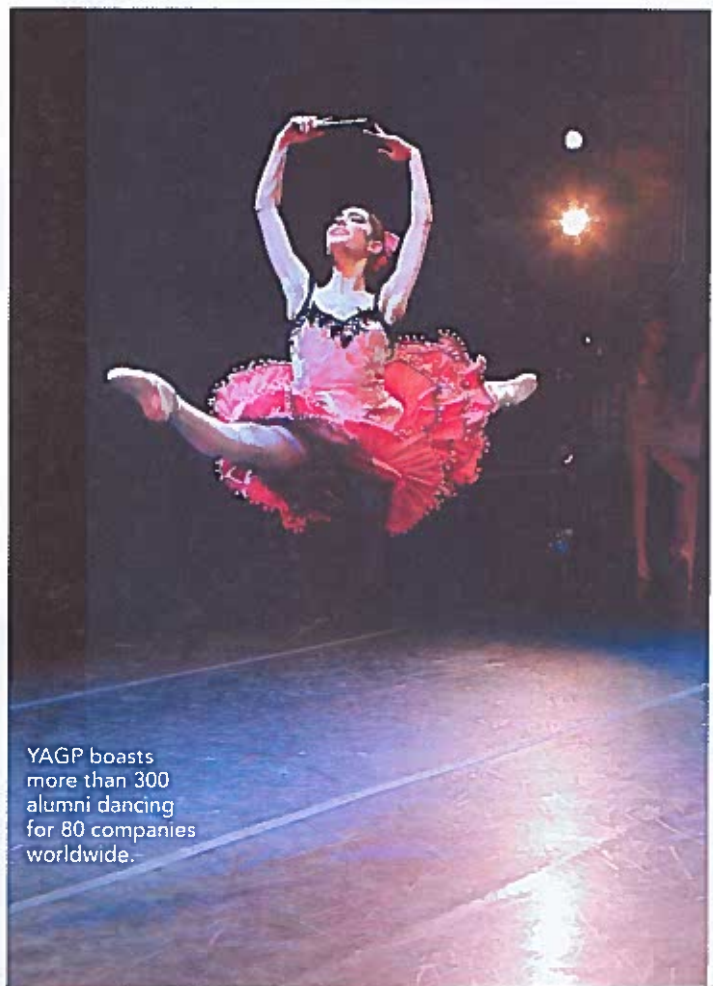
Competitions also seem to promote an exceptional kind of resiliency. Being constantly coached for competitions creates dancers who absorb constructive criticism easily—and the judging process teaches them early on how subjective dance is as an art form. As Saki learned at a young age, “One person may fall



Showstopper hosts more than 50 events each year.

“A lot of competition dancers come into companies day one with verve and fire.”

—DESMOND RICHARDSON



YAGP boasts more than 300 alumni dancing for 80 companies worldwide.

# DANCE BY THE NUMBERS

How do judges manage the role of subjectivity in their scores?

There's no one right way to score a competition solo. Sure, we can count fouettés—but what about artistry? When every pair of eyes sees the same performance differently, how do judges keep personal opinions from swaying results? Five veterans share their strategies for navigating the tricky terrain of putting numbers on an art form.



## Mandy Moore

**"So You Think You Can Dance,"**

**JUMP Dance Convention**

Judging is an opinion, that's really all it is. Two people will never think the same thing. Because it's never black-and-white; dance has a lot of colors to it.

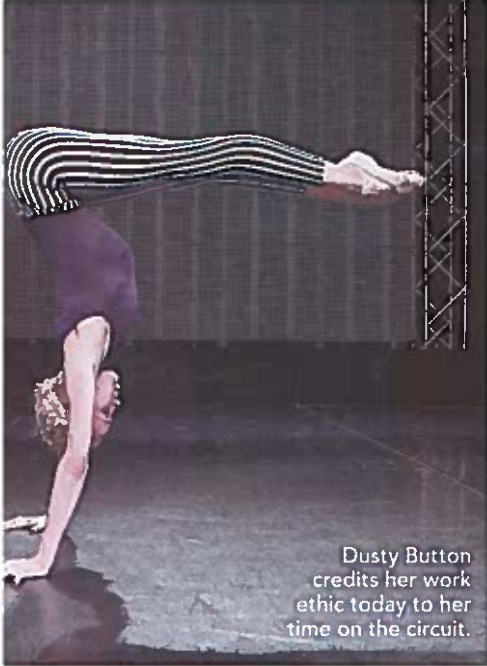
So many things can affect the judging experience. You can be having a good day or a bad day. You feel differently when you are 10 hours into judging than in the first 45 minutes. We are humans and not computers. I try to spend the first 30 seconds of every piece not thinking anything or jumping in with preconceived ideas, because that first judgment can be wrong. You may think, "Oh I know these kids," or "I like this song," or "Great opening movement," and that can



sway everything. So I let my mind go blank, and just take it in. I let the dance sit for a while. This really helps me remain objective.

I look for the shape, technique and line, and the emotion, feeling and connection to the song. I try not

to judge kids unfairly over things like hair and costumes, which were their teachers' choices. But there is no way you can be entirely objective in judging art. It's sticky to be putting a number on it, but that's competition.



Dusty Button credits her work ethic today to her time on the circuit.



Ida Saki became more adventurous at competitions like LA Dance Magic.

Clockwise from top left: Courtesy Showstopper; Courtesy Button; Courtesy Saki; Rachel Pappo for Pointe

in love with you while the person sitting next to them couldn't care less."

Dusty Button, a Boston Ballet principal who cut her teeth at NYCDA and Showstopper, believes her competitive sensibility helped her rise to the top of the ballet company hierarchy unusually fast. "It fostered a work ethic in the sense that I believe if you're going to rehearse, it should be at your best 100 percent of the time," she says. "Otherwise, you slow yourself from progressing." Button is only one example at Boston Ballet: Fellow young principals like Whitney Jensen and Jeffrey Cirio also racked up multiple titles before rising through the company's ranks. It's an unsurprising trend in a company where the rep thrives on thrilling virtuosity.

The pitfalls of focusing so much attention on performing a variation for a contest, especially for a less experienced student, tend to show up in the details of proper technique. Either because of a rush to do advanced steps too soon or out of a desire to absorb so many different styles so quickly, the fine-tuning can be overlooked. Teaching ballet for Velocity Dance Convention and Competition, Melissa Sandvig, who danced for Milwaukee Ballet and on "So You Think You Can Dance," often sees amazing movers whipping off eight pirouettes, yet finds herself focusing on basic technical aspects of a step or transitions between positions. Richardson agrees: "They may have no problem with performing, but it's the transitions, passing through fifth, that sometimes is left out."

Richardson's new competition brainchild, Élite Dance Tournament, tries to meld the best of both worlds by giving young dancers an opportunity to be seen—and to focus on technical details and artistry. In a fashion similar to the Prix de Lausanne, EDT requires contestants to take scored master classes that are limited to just 25 students.

It's no surprise that aspiring professionals are attracted to the unparalleled exposure offered at competitions. "You have to go for it to get noticed now and take risks to get better," says Sandvig. Competitions train young dancers to do just that. But as more and more come through this route, the trick will be converting so many standout dancers into members of an aesthetically coherent ensemble, rather than a band of solo artists sparring for the spotlight. ■

A former dancer, Candice Thompson is a frequent contributor to Dance Magazine.

NEW YORK, NEW YORK...  
IT'S A HELLUVA TOWN!



**THE BEST MUSICAL  
OF THE YEAR**

Ben Brantley,  
The New York Times

**"THE BEST DANCING  
ON BROADWAY."**

Ben Brantley  
of The New York Times  
on

**"EVERYTHING  
A GREAT SHOW  
SHOULD BE!"**

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

**"AN EXPLOSION  
OF PURE JOY!"**

Hollywood  
REPORTER

ON THE  
TOWN



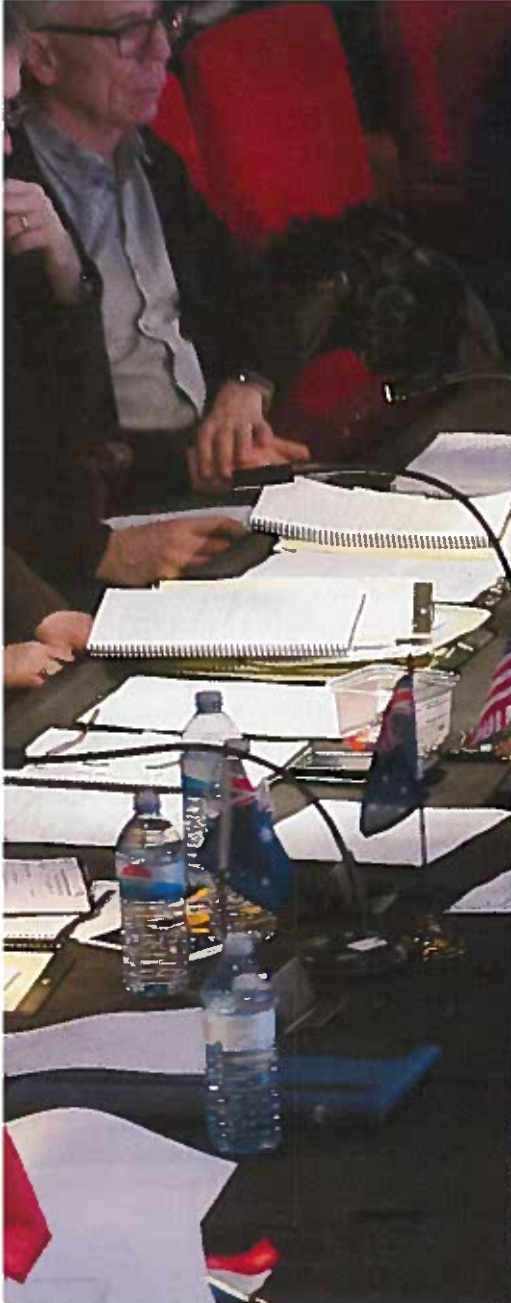
LYRIC THEATRE

213 W. 42nd St. btwn 7th & 8th Aves

★ OnTheTownBroadway.com ★

Ticketmaster.com

PHOTO BY JAY LAMORE



The judging panel and a competitor at the 2015 YAGP finals

## Mary Ann Lamb

### Showstopper

Every judge brings his or her own sensibility, due to their training and history as a performer. While there are certain technical standards every judge is looking for, sometimes a dancer can touch you personally. Dance is not a sport; it is an art. But even as an artist, dancers must learn the craft, and the technique of that craft.



My personal pet peeves don't count when judging – I always strive to be fair to everyone. Every dancer

who steps on that stage has worked very hard to get there, and bravely stands up in front of a camera and a crowd. It is my job as a judge to take this in, to appreciate it and, as fairly as I can, give a critique that will help that dancer become better.

## Hae Shik Kim

**Prix de Lausanne, Beijing International Ballet and Choreography Competition, Cape Town IBC, Helsinki IBC, Indianapolis IBC, USA IBC, Valentina Kozlova IBC, Varna IBC**

Objectivity is made easier because each competition has definite guidelines to follow. I have judged for 28 major international ballet competitions, and each

provides evaluation guidelines on clarity, turnout, footwork, turns, jumps, extension, épaulement, expression, artistry, style, musicality and presentation. I check these carefully and try to avoid subconsciously coloring my scores.



At the end, the tabulation center typically takes out the highest and lowest scores for the final points. That is why they have so many judges: to be fair to the competitors. In my experience, that makes remaining objective easier.

So Danca Presents

A weekend to help rising junior and senior high school students and their parents navigate college dance programs.

SAVE \$50.00

REGISTER BY 8/1/15 & registration is only \$149.00

# COLLEGE Dance Fair



Photos courtesy of each college/university and are listed in order, left to right: Butler University by Brent Smith; CCM; University of North Carolina SOA by Peter Mueller; AMDA; University of North Carolina SOA by Rosalie O'Connor

**September 4, 2015 | 6pm-8pm**  
**September 5, 2015 | 10am-7pm**  
**September 6, 2015 | 10am-5pm**

Fourth annual South Florida College Dance fair, a one-stop shop to meet representatives from the countries top dance programs.



- Take up to 3 master classes per day on Saturday and Sunday taught by renowned college dance faculty.
- Speak one-on-one with representatives from participating schools.
- Attend sessions for both students and parents to obtain information about the various schools, from applications to auditions, classes, and more.
- Network with dance students from around the country.

Space is limited  
**Register Now**  
Call 561.995.0709

Cost: \$199

Location: Boca Ballet Theatre  
7630 NW 6th Avenue  
Boca Raton, FL 33487



Artistic Directors: Dan Gurn & Jane Tynce

For More Information  
[www.collegedancefair.org](http://www.collegedancefair.org)

Participating colleges subject to change.



"By the second round, we all have our favorite dancer." —John Meehan

## Suzi Taylor

New York City Dance Alliance

We can be objective about several aspects of dance, including technique, musicality, precision in a group and overall execution. Even personality—either you have a stage presence or you don't. But, of course, a judge's personal style and taste come into the equation.



Sometimes, the choreography can play a role. For example, I have seen brilliant choreography that makes not-so-good dancers look good, and just the opposite. We have it drilled into us at NYCDA to look at the ability of the dancers and not the choreography. Sure, there are things that can be annoying, like music that hurts my ears, or formulaic dancing, or crazy things like a series of fouettés that end up in a tap sequence. But the dancers are not responsible for those choices. Some studios have tons of money and can hire choreographers, while others do not have that advantage.

In the end, we are looking for what moves us. You would be surprised at how often the judges agree on that. We really do come together on selecting artists of the highest quality.

## John Meehan

Prix de Lausanne, Youth America Grand Prix, Genée IBC, USA IBC

At first, I thought the idea of dance competitions was ridiculous. This is an art form, and some things can be brilliant to some and completely uninteresting to others. But I have

grown to value competitions: The late teen years are so important, so much comes together for these young dancers quickly and we need a place to see that.

We all have priorities: Some judges will be looking for musicality, others how someone walks onstage. There will be cases where the technique is not as strong, but they have great potential. Sometimes, a dancer can remind you of someone you love and you can react in a positive way, or just the opposite. You have to keep the big picture in mind. I look for a dancer's ability to move me, and often with a detail. For me, it's not the big steps—they can all do those—but the transitions, their phrasing or what part of the combination they feature. Sometimes, it's their dramatic choices. They can be great communicators, but it all happens at the same level. A more enigmatic performance will have more light and shade to it.

By the second round, we all have our favorite dancer, and we want them to do well, but then they might fall apart in the final round, and we must mark them down. That's hard. And sometimes we are judging students who we know or have taught. Do we judge them by what they do just at the competition or what we know they are capable of?

In the end, we have to put that mark down. But the most important thing about judging is that one doesn't do it alone. If I were asked to be the

sole judge, I would never agree to that. ■

*Nancy Wozny lives, writes and does her best to be objective in Houston, Texas.*



JULY 2015