

## GOOD LUCK!

Australian students who auditioned successfully for the Youth American Grand Prix by DVD were:

Dominique Yong (17), from Alegria Dance Studios, Sydney; Evan Loudon (14), Phoebe Warlow (13), Emily Smith (16), Amelia Baxter (13), Annabelle Miranda (13), Hayley Collins (17), Lauren Muir (16) and Tiffany Jones (16), all from the Tanya Pearson Classical Coaching Academy, Sydney; Danielle Muir (14) and Daniel Roberge (17) from the National College of Dance, Newcastle; and Chloe Hitchen (16) from the Conlan College of Classical Ballet, Sydney.

Class



# The YOUTH AMERICA GRAND PRIX

The Youth America Grand Prix in New York is becoming an increasingly important date on a young student's calendar. **SUSAN REITER** reports.

**S**INCE it began 10 years ago, the Youth America Grand Prix (YAGP) has achieved an impressive world-wide status. "We try to present ourselves as educational organisation, rather than a competition," says founder/artistic director Larissa Saveliev. The focus is on providing scholarships rather than handing out medals – although it does that as well. But while the winners in the various categories (senior, junior and pre-competitive) dance on stage at New York's City Center at the culminating gala (April 22 this year) – and often are headed for impressive careers – they represent only a fraction of what YAGP is really about.

"What you see at City Center, I would say, is one per cent of those who get scholarships," Saveliev emphasises. "There are many more scholarship recipients than there are winners." Of the roughly 150 competitors in the senior category (ages 15 to 19), she estimates that at least one-third – and sometimes as many as one-half – will emerge from YAGP with a scholarship.

This year's YAGP will take place from April 17 to 21. All the participants will be eligible for scholarships to 27 leading schools in both the USA and around the world – including the Australian Ballet School. Directors of schools and companies will be in the audience, observing and evaluating the young dancers.

An intensive series of semifinal rounds keeps Saveliev, the YAGP faculty and judges, very busy. From January through to March, they travel to a different US city each week. Earlier, semifinals were held in Brazil (September), Italy and Japan (November). Mexico is included every other year. For those not living within four hours of a semifinal location, video entries are accepted – which is how young Australian dancers apply.

"We had a huge amount of Australians this year. I think we received close to a 100 videos," Saveliev reports. Twelve of them (ages 13 to 17) are coming to New York (see box).

Australian Ballet School director Marilyn Rowe and New Zealand School of Dance director Garry Trinder are among the New York City panel of judges/teachers, and ABS faculty member Leigh Rowles was a judge/teacher for the Japan semifinals.

Semi-final rounds, each lasting three days, are open to any ballet student interested in participating. But they are strictly graded (according to the American academic system, with 100 as a perfect grade), and only those with a minimum score of 95 qualify for the finals. "So you have to be an 'A' student" to qualify for New York," Saveliev says. "We have two groups of kids: those who are very serious and committed, looking to come to New York, with

hope of getting a job or scholarship – or we have those who just come to a regional semifinal for the experience."

Saveliev co-founded YAGP with her husband Gennadi Saveliev, a soloist with American Ballet Theatre (ABT) who serves as the competition's president and executive director; both danced with the Bolshoi Ballet. While emphasising the educational aspect of the event, she also speaks proudly of alumni whose careers have blossomed. Several members of ABT were YAGP winners. Cory Stearns, a fast-rising soloist with the company, was YAGP's first international scholarship recipient, back in 2001. He attended the Royal Ballet School thanks to the competition. Saveliev notes that "last year, we had over 60 senior men – very strong year for the boys. One joined the Royal, one went to Stuttgart, two to National Ballet of Canada, one to San Francisco Ballet, one to the Bolshoi – all from the same year."

David Alvarez and Kiril Kulish, two very young award-winners in the pre-competitive division (ages 9 to 11) in 2006 (Kulish also won the Youth Grand Prix Award, for the junior age division, in 2007) are now both playing Billy Elliot on Broadway.

But there are many ways to be a winner at YAGP. "For example, you can receive last place, by the score, but if the director of a major school likes you, you can get a scholarship."

Jasmin Dwyer, a National College of Dance student competing in last year's YAGP: she is now in the Washington Ballet as a direct result of her participation.