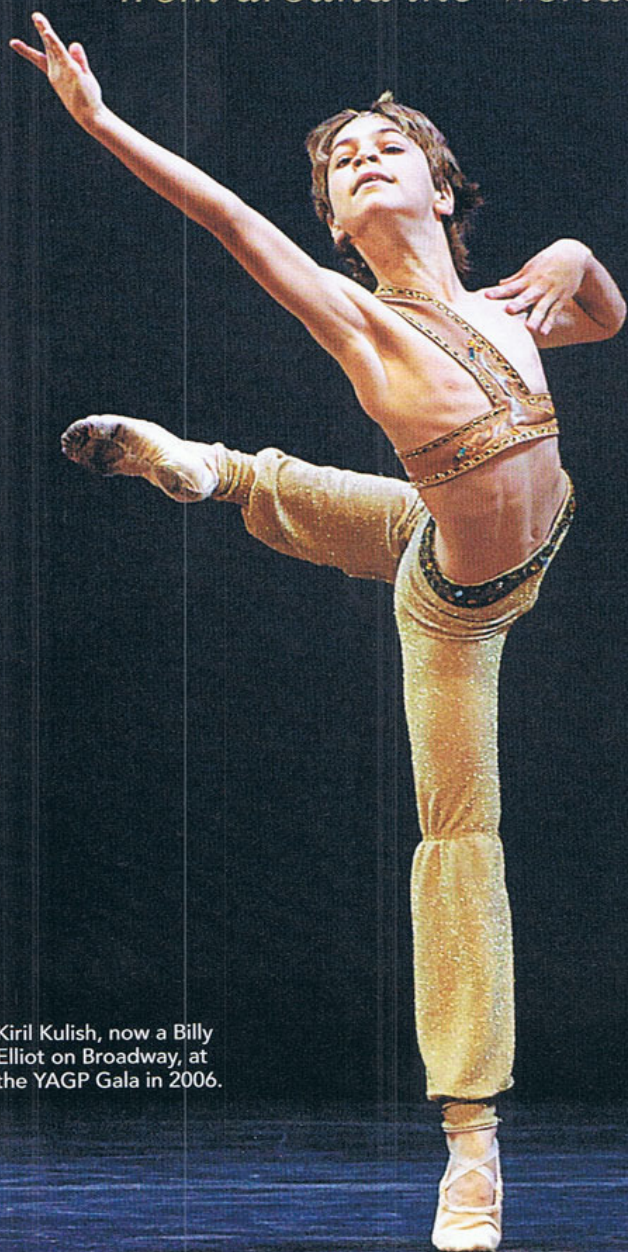


# the Dazzle

BY JOSEPH CARMAN

*Youth America Grand Prix celebrates 10 sparkling years of showcasing young talent from around the world.*



Kiril Kulish, now a Billy Elliot on Broadway, at the YAGP Gala in 2006.

**t**he late Clive Barnes, whose insights contributed so much to this magazine, once called the annual Youth America Grand Prix gala in New York, "the highlight of the season." Dance enthusiasts will argue fiercely about the most memorable performances of the year, but one thing is clear. The YAGP gala, slated for April 22, sparks enough excitement to sell out all 2,750 seats at New York City Center in the blink of an eye. And the buzz results from the star wattage onstage as well as the future talent the gala presents.

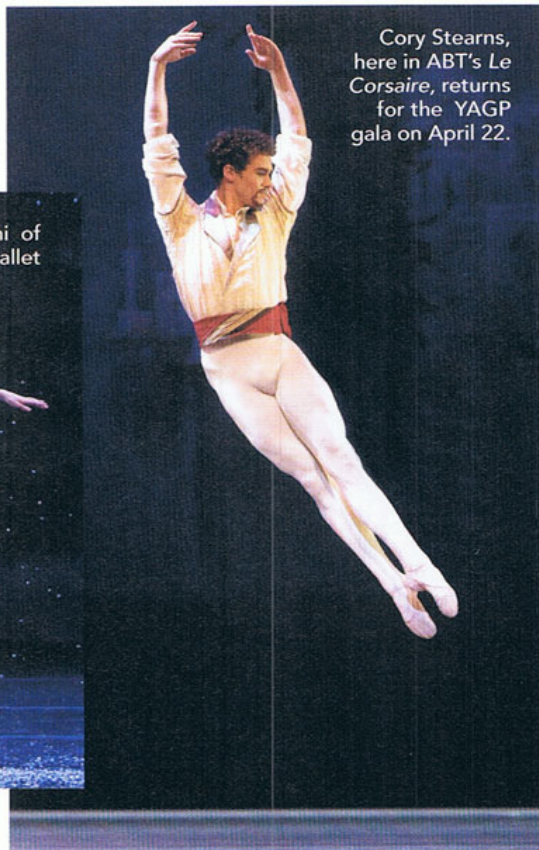
This year marks the 10th anniversary of the YAGP gala. What started out as a small-scale American competition, established in 1999 by Larissa and Gennadi Saveliev for dancers to win scholarships, has mushroomed into a highly influential juggernaut in the international ballet world. "The gala is the pinnacle, the culmination to which our season leads," says Sergey Gordeev, director of external affairs for YAGP. After a year of preliminary and semi-final rounds around the world in which students perform classical and contemporary solos, the finals of the competition take place in New York during a packed week. Seven hundred student finalists, ages 9–19, take master classes, audition for scholarships, perform, and are judged on their potential.

The winners share the gala stage with international guest artists from top ballet companies. The first part features student winners (and potential ballet stars) of the YAGP. After intermission, the adult ballet stars dazzle with their bravura performances. Inevitably, the audience, especially the excited kids, scream loudly enough to rival the closing minutes of the World Series.

This year's gala, hosted by Christopher Wheeldon, features alumni of YAGP in every piece. Among those scheduled to perform are the sublime Sara Mearns of NYCB; Charles Andersen and Eliabe D'Abadia from the Royal Danish Ballet; rising stars Cory Stearns, Sarah Lane, and Hee Seo from ABT; Mathias Heymann of the Paris Opéra Ballet; Angelina Zuccarini of the Stuttgart Ballet; Hiroko Asami



Luciana Voltolini of  
Boston Ballet



Cory Stearns,  
here in ABT's *Le  
Corsaire*, returns  
for the YAGP  
gala on April 22.

of the Dresden Semperoper Ballet; James Moore from Pacific Northwest Ballet; the virtuosic Danny Tidwell; and alumni from the Washington Ballet in a ballet by Choo San Goh. The program will close with the brilliant Natalia Osipova and Ivan Vasiliev of the Bolshoi Ballet (see cover story, Sept. 2008). To add punch to the anniversary, a second gala night will celebrate the great Bolshoi teacher Peter Pestov, with performances by illustrious former students like Vladimir Malakhov, Yuri Possokhov, and Sascha Radetsky.

The YAGP gala evenings incorporate three main components: artists making their New York debuts, new choreography, and classical ballet chestnuts. Dancers who have made their solo New York debuts at the YAGP gala include Denis and Anastasia Matvienko of the Bolshoi, Cecilia Kerche of the Municipal Ballet Theatre of Rio de Janeiro, Mizuka Ueno of the Tokyo Ballet, and Polina Semionova of Staatsballett Berlin.

"We try to bring something new that New York has not seen," says Larissa Saveliev. "We want to keep a balance between New York favorites and other artists who aren't as well known. I am always searching in Europe and elsewhere for new talent." The gala also offers the opportunity to view dancers rarely seen in the U.S., such as Manuel Legris and Aurélie Dupont of the Paris

Opéra Ballet and Igor Zelensky of the Kirov Ballet. Choreographers like Adam Houglund have launched their careers on the YAGP gala stage. "Some of the kids in the competition have never heard of Béjart, Kylián, or Petit," adds Saveliev, "and we always make sure they recognize the old establishment choreographers and see the new names as well."

The decision to have students performing on the same program as professionals initially raised eyebrows. "When people hear that kids are dancing, they immediately think recital," says Saveliev. "It was risky in the beginning. But we are proud of changing the mentality about competitions and children onstage."

Gordeev stresses that the one word that can summarize YAGP and its gala is education. "The competition acts as a tool to identify gifted students, give them scholarships to study at some of the top schools, and help them become professional dancers," says Gordeev. Prior to the gala, YAGP announces 80 to 100 winners who receive a total of \$250,000 in scholarships.

Among those past winners is Kiril Kulish, one of the three young dancers performing the title role in the Broadway hit *Billy Elliot: The Musical*. Kulish began competing in regional YAGP competitions at the age of 8 under the guidance of his teachers Maxim and Sylvia

Tchernychev at the San Diego Academy of Ballet. When he was 12, he performed as a finalist at the New York competition. Dancing the male variation from *Le Corsaire* pas de deux, he won the 2007 Grand Prix in the Junior Division. Nora Brennan, the children's casting director for *Billy Elliot*, spotted him and asked his teachers if he would audition for the show. "Without the Youth America Grand Prix," says Kulish, "I wouldn't have been noticed or been able to take part in such a big Broadway show."

Kulish, 14, says the competition and the dancing at the gala afforded him other invaluable benefits. "The experience of meeting other kids who are just as talented from other countries, like Japan and Russia, and then taking classes with amazing teachers was wonderful," says Kulish. "The ability to regularly perform onstage helped me a lot." Kulish plans to compete in future YAGP competitions and has his eyes set on a serious ballet career when he outgrows his *Billy Elliot* role.

In a very different set of circumstance, Luciana Voltolini, a native of Joinville, Brazil, and a student at Escola de Teatro Bolshoi do Brasil, also got her big break at the YAGP competition. When she sent a video of her dancing to John Meehan, then the director of ABT Studio Company, he was impressed. He contacted Brazilian choreographer Carlos dos Santos Jr., who assisted her in making it to the finals in 2004. (Dos Santos choreographs the Grand Defilé—the finale that closes the YAGP gala.) She danced a variation from *Don Quixote* and a contemporary solo that dos Santos made for her in her hotel room in New York. Voltolini's performance garnered a scholarship to the Boston Ballet School. "If it weren't for this competition, it would have been very difficult for me to become a professional dancer," says Voltolini, now a member of Boston Ballet's corps. "In Brazil, we don't have many options for classical dancers. Now I dance for a living, and that's all that I wanted to do. My wish came true."

The first half of the gala showcases the diversity of young dancers and the types of training around the world, as well as a balance of choreographic styles. Most of the performers are prize or scholarship winners, but not always. "If someone has an interesting choreographic piece or is a compelling performer,"

says Gordeev, "there is a place on the program for them."

A central mission of the YAGP is to generate interest for ballet among younger audiences. The gala represents the tip of the iceberg of the many local competitions and performances that introduce talent to attendees of regional events in places as diverse as Spartanburg, South Carolina, and Tokyo, Japan. These regional competitions, along with opportunities for younger dancers (most competitions start their competitors at age 15), set the YAGP apart from other international events.

Similar to the performers onstage, a portion of the audience at the YAGP gala resembles a "who's who" in the ballet world. Directors and teachers from major schools and companies like ABT, The Royal Ballet, Hamburg Ballet, National Ballet of Canada, Australian Ballet, and the Stuttgart Ballet make up the jury pool and/or come to scout for talent. "This is a global dance summit," says Gordeev. "They know what style the company is looking for—what kind of dancer, what type of musicality, body type, or height. These matches that happen at our competition are long lasting."

Sergeev calls the YAGP "the internet of the dance world." That could be construed as slightly hyperbolic, but he has a point. In the last 10 years, the YAGP has reached over 25,000 dancers through its workshops, audition classes, and competitions. More than 200 alumni are dancing in 50 companies around the world, and students have been awarded more than \$2 million in scholarships to major academies. "The YAGP and its galas," he claims, "have changed the way dancers think about launching their careers and given them hope."

Saveliev takes it a step further: "We have changed the way the world thinks about ballet and competitions, especially in the U.S."

It is common practice to talk about change in the world today. The lasting impact of YAGP may take more than a decade to determine. But YAGP has undoubtedly contributed to the nurturing and preparation of many dance careers through a humane competition process.

*Joseph Carman is a DM contributing editor and the author of Round About the Ballet.*