

YAGP

in Europe

Dance Europe asks YAGP's artistic director LARISSA SAVELIEV about the competition's new venture

Founded in 2000 by former Bolshoi Ballet dancers Larissa and Gennadi Saveliev, the Youth America Grand Prix is the only student ballet competition in America awarding scholarships to leading dance schools in the U.S. and abroad. The finals of the competition are held in New York in April but, since its early years, the YAGP has held semi-finals throughout America and in South America, Brazil and Japan. Aspiring entrants living outside of these regions have had the option of submitting a video of their work for consideration.

While, like the longer established Prix de Lausanne, the YAGP welcomes dancers of all nationalities, the former is only open to dancers between the ages of 15 and 18, whereas YAGP invites entries from dancers aged from 9 - 19 years. It is this difference which has fuelled, in part, YAGP's new venture into Europe. The competition's artistic director Larissa Saveliev explains "many parents, with young students, have asked why don't we hold a semi-final in Europe? And, too, some schools prefer to start the process of moulding a dancer from the very beginning. They feel that often there is little that can be done when a dancer has already developed their style and technique by the age of 17-18". And for many young Europeans seeking to win a scholarship, the cost of travelling to and staying in New York, with parents or chaperones in tow, has been off putting. Not, though, for all: the Russian Sergiy Polunin won the Grand Prix in 2006 and Irish-born Melissa Hamilton scooped the same prize in New York this year. Both are now dancing with the Royal Ballet in London.

In order to establish a European heat, financial backing was needed and this has now been secured through a new associate in Italy. "Our partner in Italy is the Federal National Association of Dance Schools, with its president, Rosanna Pasi," explains Larissa down the worse phone connection possible between London and New York. "We believe that combining their network of connections with the local government and other resources with our many relationships in the European dance community will result in a successful introduction of a YAGP regional semi-final competition in Europe."

While the YAGP was partially inspired by the Prix de Lausanne, "we are a completely different organisation," says Larissa. "At the YAGP, scholarships can be awarded in two different ways. Firstly, based purely on potential, regardless of the entrant's performance, and secondly, by an individual school director, regardless of the opinion of the rest of the jury - which can vary greatly! It is a radically new system that has proven to be very successful - so we are not comparing ourselves with Prix de Lausanne; we are just completely different in our approach to how the scholarships are awarded. But for those age groups that overlap with Prix de Lausanne - ages 15-18 - we have instituted a participant exchange programme with the Prix: if a dancer did not receive a

The first YAGP semi-final will take place in Faenza, Italy, from 30 November - 2 December 2007. The jury will include: Frederic Olivieri - Director, La Scala Ballet School; Gailene Stock - Director, Royal Ballet School; Raymond Lukens - Artistic Coordinator, ABT/NYU Master's Degree Program; Marianne Kruse - Director, Hamburg Ballet School; and Tadeusz Matacz - Director, John Cranko School of Ballet. For more information and registration go to www.yagp.eu.

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scholarship offer at either one of the competitions, they receive a passage without audition to the other competition. This allows our competitions to combine - and expand - our scholarship-giving ability. We enjoy a very good professional relationship with Prix de Lausanne and are happy to work together on the same mission: to help shape the future of dance by providing educational and professional opportunities to young dancers."

Inevitably, though, many who aspire to be professional dancers are unlikely to make the grade. How does one cope with these hopefuls? "I don't tell them. As a director of the competition, it is not my place to tell dancers whether I think they can make it or not. Our goal is to give them an opportunity to perform and provide a forum for them to be seen by some of the top dance professionals in the world - and, if they, after all that exposure, discover that the school directors are not extending any offers to them, this may be information that speaks for itself. But, in any case, we are not only geared towards those who are likely to become ballet professionals. The entire process - of performing, meeting new friends from all over the world, taking classes with some of the best teachers in the world, and being immersed in an atmosphere of excitement about dance - is designed

not only give a boost to a professional dance career, but also just to deepen their appreciation of the art form. The future of ballet depends not only on professional dancers, but also on developing an educated and appreciative audience.

"The hardest thing for me is to see so many beautiful, talented dancers, knowing that many of them will have to change careers, not being able to pursue their dreams in such a difficult dance job market. At least here in America, there are very few dance jobs - there are not that many spots that open up in existing dance companies, and there aren't really any new dance companies that recruit dancers without professional experience. So the competition is very hard.

"Also, it is difficult to deal with some of the stage mothers. There are parents who are wonderful and supportive, and that's extremely important, because without their support, the students would not be able to achieve their goals. But some of them push their children to dance even though the children don't have the passion for it. So the children suffer, and so does everyone around them."



Larissa Baveliev - artistic director and founder YAQP