

Dance International

"Review of YAGP Final Round & Gala"

Fall 2009

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Amid excited whispers in a babble of languages and a rustle of programmes, the performances that cap the annual Youth America Grand Prix got underway again. To celebrate its 10th anniversary in April, this popular international ballet competition expanded its finale, spreading it across three gala evenings at New York City Centre.

For the first time, the City Centre stage grandly framed the competition's Final Round, accounting for the atmosphere of near hysteria on Tuesday, when many members of the audience presumably had a personal connection to these events. No, this wasn't the usual crowd. For who, apart from ballet mothers, bun-heads and the panel of judges — and only the most passionate of balletomanes — could endure an evening of nearly 80 solo variations danced back to back by children in their early to late teens?

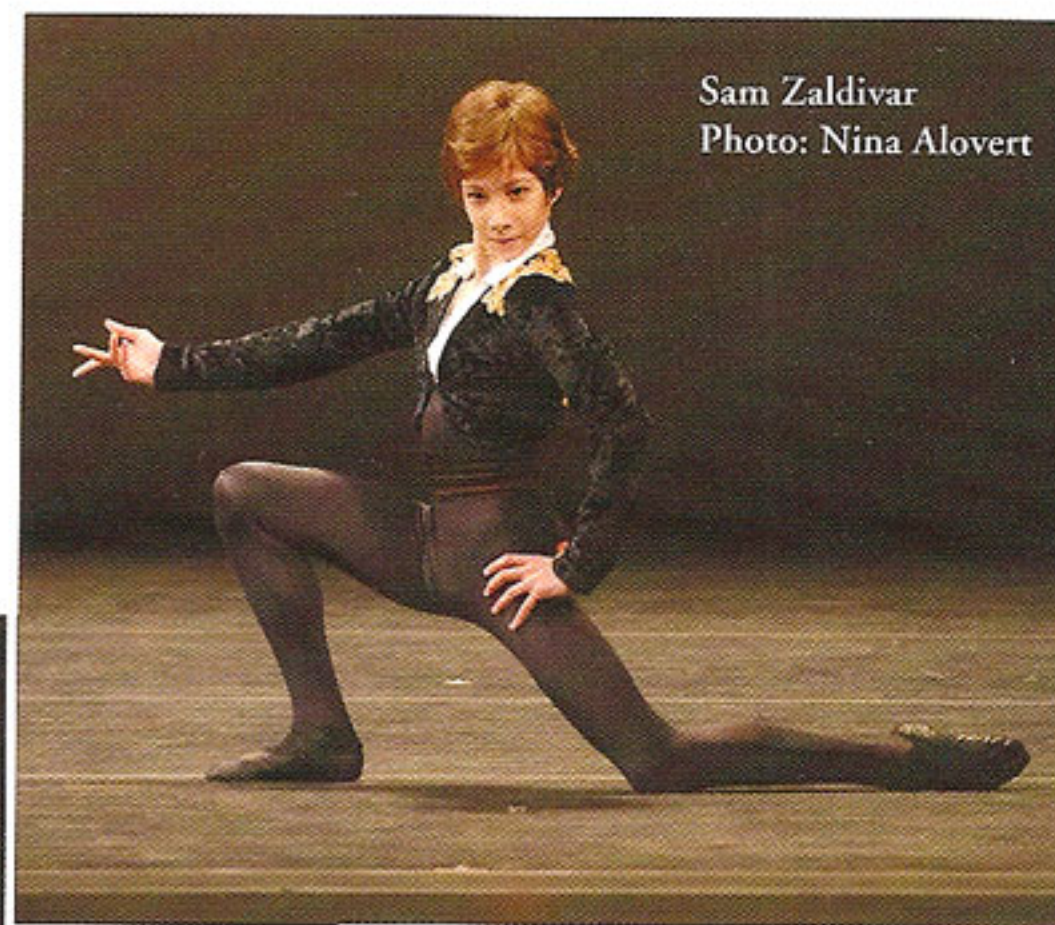
The theatre was filled with thousands of spectators. Yet even the most devoted surely had to admit to feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of finalists. Finalists! Don't even ask about the semi-finals and preliminaries, with variations whizzing by in rapid succession. How do the judges do it?

The precocity of the youngest dancers — the triple pirouettes, for example, with which 13-year-old Miho Naotsuka studied her Black Swan variation — was astounding. Classical dance education has proliferated around the globe. Not only that, the quality of education has improved. The diaspora of Russian ballet teachers that followed Perestroika has lifted standards worldwide. Like the "old" Russians, these new Russians have had a direct impact through their teaching — and an indirect effect through their example.

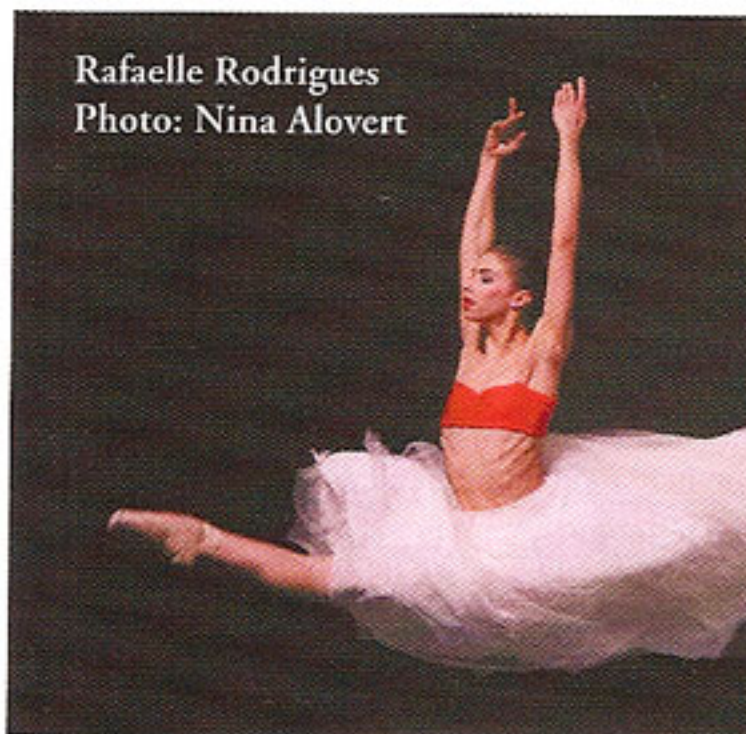
Triple pirouettes are nothing, however — merely an athletic stunt — if they are not accompanied by style and interpretation. Tuesday's event certainly had its excesses. Among the seniors, one remarkably limber young man, in *passé*, brought his foot all the way to his groin. Yet, at this competition, style and musical phrasing were also plentiful. The poetic languor that 12-year-old Mizuki Horie brought to a variation from *Le Talisman*, for instance,

was quite affecting, as was the polished elegance of 13-year-old Sam Zaldivar, in *Don Quixote*.

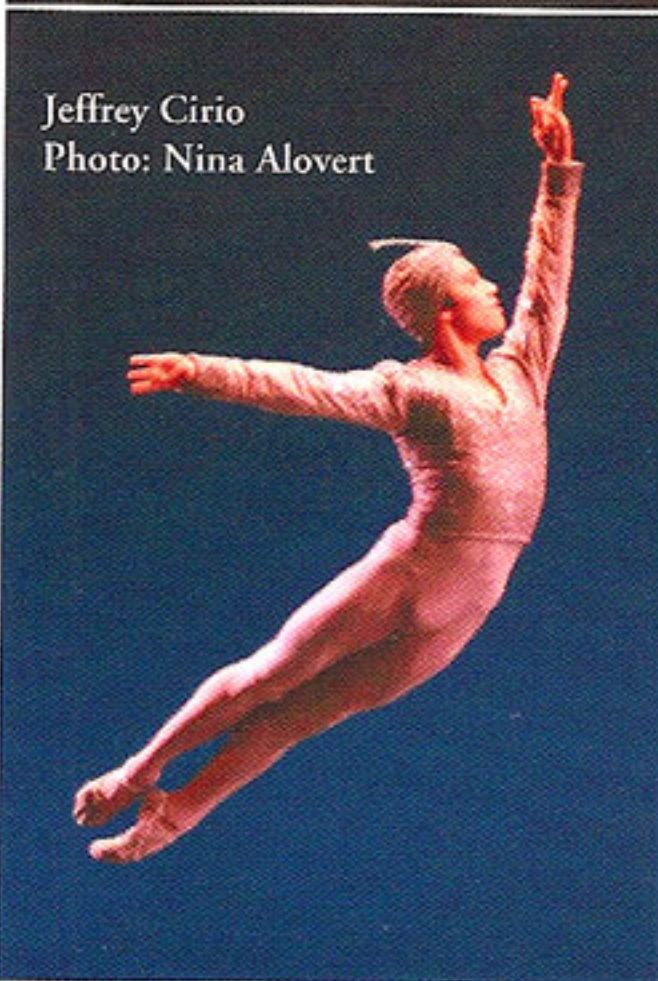
The question that gnaws at viewers during these events is — which of these prodigies will mature successfully? As the evening progressed, and talent seemed to grow scarcer, it became apparent that the



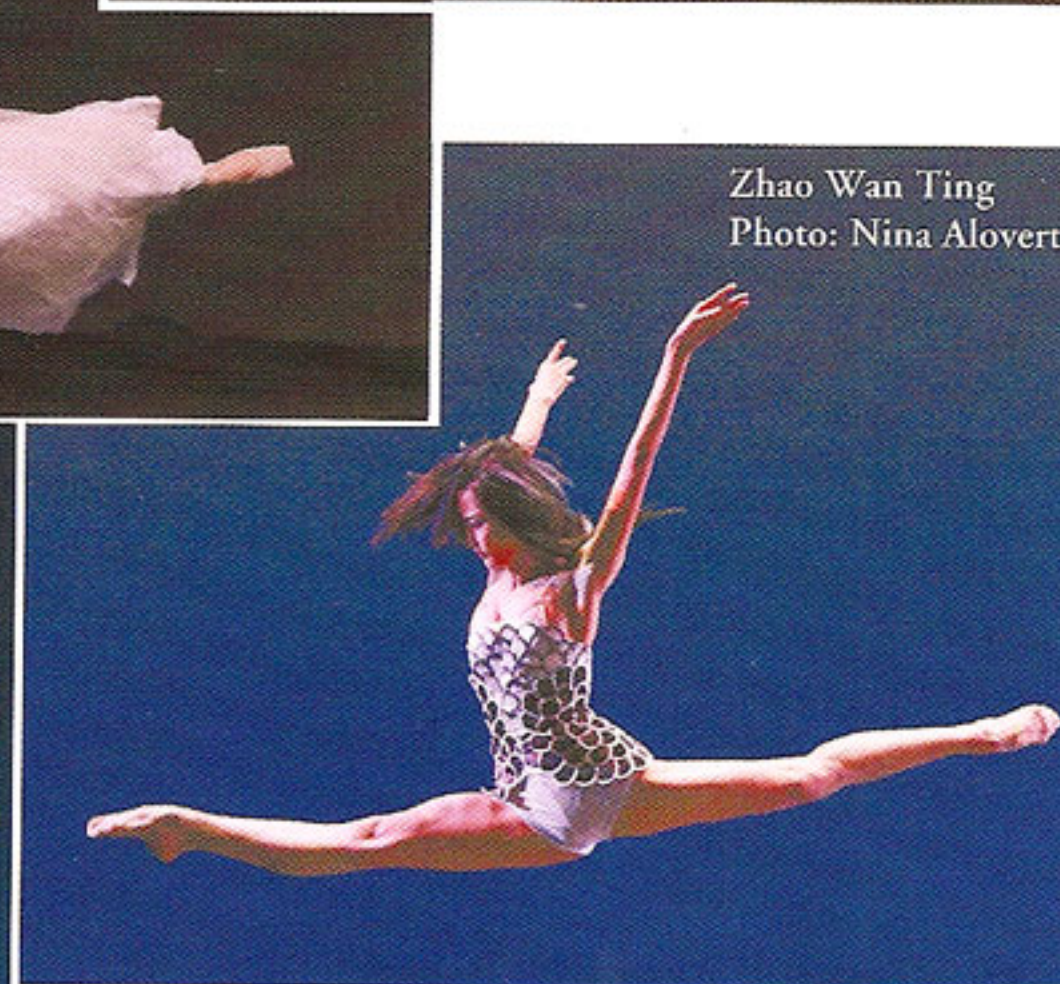
Sam Zaldivar
Photo: Nina Alover



Rafaelle Rodrigues
Photo: Nina Alover



Jeffrey Cirio
Photo: Nina Alover



Zhao Wan Ting
Photo: Nina Alover

jaw-dropping skills displayed by the youngest contestants do not automatically predict future brilliance. Baby ballet accomplishments are wonderful, but somewhat misleading because the youngest dancers are still unimpeded by the weight, the higher centre of gravity and the curves of their adult bodies — not to mention the psychological changes that will occur.

One looks with admiration, and fond hope, at the 14-year-olds. This group offered the calm placement and fluidity of Kanami Uenishi, and the natural glamour of long-legged Soo Ah Kang, both dancing variations from *Paquita*. Patrick Frenette was wonderfully quick and stable in *Swan Lake*. Marcelino Sambe showed a colossal jump in *The Flames of Paris*. And Takehiro Tamagawa concluded his variation from *La Bayadère* with a dramatic backbend to the floor. Yet among the juniors only Esteban Hernandez displayed the sophistication of a mature artist, in his musicality, his daring, his blistering speed and precise execution.

The seniors seemed a trifle less original, so that one could admire many of the same qualities in dancers such as Elisa Badenes Vasquez, 17, Sara Michelle Murawski, 17, and Rafaelle Queiroz Rodrigues, 18, although all three of these lovely young women currently train at different schools. Rodrigues had an especially attractive movement quality in her variation from *La Bayadère*. Still, the musical intelligence that 19-year-old Tamako Miyazaki brought to a wonderfully phrased variation from *Esmeralda* might be a better indicator of her value as an artist in a dramatic repertoire. Though on the small side, Jeffrey Cirio, 17, gave a grandly scaled performance of Solor's variation from *The Kingdom of the Shades*.

Some of these young artists were allowed to repeat their performances the following night, when the Youth America Grand Prix presented its second gala, featuring competition alumni who have gone on to professional careers. On Wednesday, too, the choreography was far more varied than the apotheosis of Petipa seen on Tuesday. Only the Australians, bless them, still displayed a touching loyalty to *Les Sylphides*.

The high point, came with the local debut of *Prokofiev Pas de Deux*, a thrillingly inventive piece choreographed in a

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traditional framework by Christopher Wheeldon. Danced by Bridgett Zehr and Zdenek Konvalina of the National Ballet of Canada, this duet displayed a wonderful logic, developing naturally as Zehr twined her arms around Konvalina's, leading to a beautiful image like a love knot, as he encircled her with an embrace.

Also impressive was *Reverence*, a duet choreographed by David Dawson in an organic movement style, developing through changes in rhythm. Hiroko Asami pushed up from the floor, executing a *développé* from a deep *plié*, or lifted her chest in resistance as she lay on her back. Her partner from Dresden State Opera Ballet was the sensitive Raphael Coumes-Marquet.

The Flames of Paris pas de deux was danced by a revitalized Matthew Golding and his partner, Natalia Tapia, both of the Corella Ballet. Marcelo Gomes' rendition of *Percussion 4*, a Bob Fosse solo in which Gomes underscored his masterful precision while presenting a mysterious, sexy and theatrical persona, was inspired.

Flashes of brilliance winked at the audience all night — Charles Anderson of the Royal Danes, bringing lyricism as well as humour to Bournonville's saucy *Jockey Dance*; and young American Ballet Theatre dancer Katherine Williams, with her oh-so-delicate footwork in the introduction to the *Grand Pas de Quatre*. This pas de quatre was divided between youngsters and established stars, making it more properly a pas de huit, recalling the gala's "Today/Tomorrow" theme. Although this simultaneous act of multiplication and division was not such a great idea, it did permit us to see both Williams and the Maryinsky Ballet's Ekaterina Kondourova, whose exquisite and gentle manners seemed worthy of her character, Taglioni. Jenifer Ringer, of New York City Ballet, similarly made the most of the dramatic opportunities in an excerpt from Balanchine's *Who Cares?* partnered by Jared Angle.

When some Maryinsky stars performed a rather uneven suite of dances from *Le Corsaire*, also featuring American

Ballet Theatre's Sarah Lane and Joseph Phillips, the event surrendered to a display of chest-thumping bravura. Through the smoke of pyrotechnic explosions, one could still see the Maryinsky at its best, in the pure, silken line of ballerina Viktoria Tereshkina. One hopes the children in the audience, especially the aspiring dancers, saw it, too.

The third and final gala, on Thursday, was appropriately a tribute to the renowned men's teacher, Peter Pestov, featuring appearances by his now world-famous students. Three galas proved an embarrassment of riches, however, and called to duty by other assignments, this reviewer was unable to attend.

Robert Johnson