

Melissa Hamilton. Photo: Nan Melville

Jim Nowakowski. Photo: Nan Melville

YAGP

EMMA MANNING reports on this year's Youth America Grand Prix in New York

In just seven years, the Youth America Grand Prix, which is open to dancers aged 9 - 19 of "all racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds", has become the world's largest student ballet scholarship competition. Founded by former Bolshoi dancers Larissa and Gennadi Saveliev, the YAGP has now awarded over US\$1,000,000 in scholarships. This year's finals took place in the packed out Martin Luther King High School's theatre, located just behind Lincoln Centre in New York. The standard in the Junior Division was set by the youngest competitor, Tiare Keeno (USA), who delivered a remarkably secure *Black Swan* for a 12 year old. The 12 year-old boys also impressed: the tiny Tomoha Terada (Japan), whose double tours were spot on; Esteban Hernandez (Mexico/USA) with his silken pirouettes; and the technically polished Kiril Kulish (USA). Terada, trained by Tanaka Ballet Art in Japan, won first place in the Junior Men's Division, Hernandez was 2nd, while Kulish scooped the Junior Grand Prix. The technical standard amongst the junior girls was also high, with triples en pointe almost de rigueur, but some lacked the personality shown by the boys.

While the majority of the other junior finalists came from America or Japan, China was represented by Liao Xiang, dancing with admirable control; Brazil by Luiza Viana Fernandes - engaging personality - and Bruna Pandini; Switzerland by Cynthia K. Hofer-Becker in a carefully studied *Giselle*; Korea by Ki Min Kim who spun effortlessly; and Australia by Gina-Marie Leathern, a promising contestant

Escuela Nacional de Danza Clásica y Contemporánea. Photo: Gene Schiavone



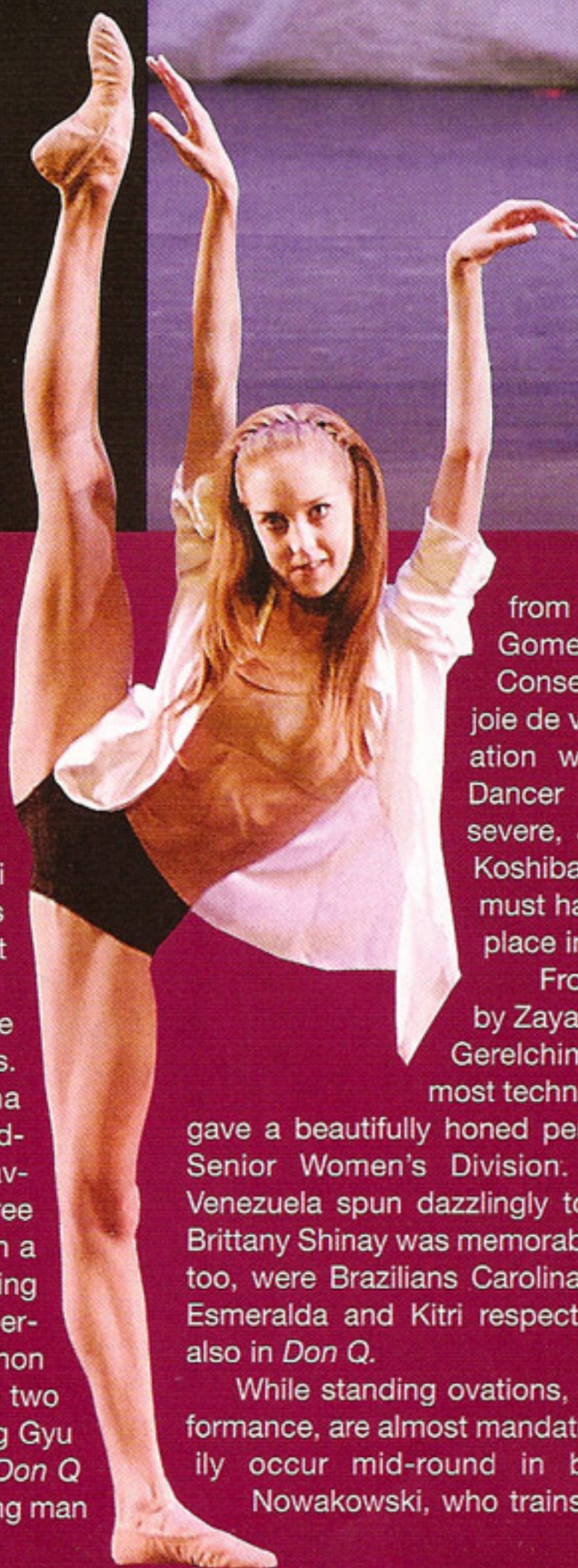
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who might try relaxing her rigid smile. Of the US entrants, Emily Kadow slid easily into the penchée in her *Diana and Acteon* variation, while Whitney Jensen dazzled with a swift series of fouettés and Bryn Gilbert demonstrated a honed technique in his solo from *Flames of Paris*. Of the Japanese, Moka Maehara was commendably composed and Machi Moritaka tossed off triples with ease, but the first prize went to Megumi Horiuchi, who tended to dance too much on her toe joints for my liking. While rounded insteps might look pretty at 14, deformed toe joints at 40 are less attractive.

On to the Senior Division and it was good to see more Europeans get through to the finals than in previous years. Listed as independents from Greece were Sasha Mukhamedov and Melissa Hamilton, who have both studied with Masha and Irek Mukhamedov in Athens since leaving Elmhurst in Birmingham. And of the top 12 men, three came from English schools: Valentino Zucchetti (RBS), in a solo from *Bayadère*, delivered the goods with an engaging smile; Charles-Louis Andre Yoshiyama (ENB School) performed his *Don Q* variation big and bold; and Chehon Wespi-Tschopp (Elmhurst) gave a musical *Corsaire*. The two other European entries in the Senior Division were Young Gyu Choi (Tanz Akademie in Zurich), whose well articulated *Don Q* earned him third place (tying with Jun Tanabe, a gifted young man



Carolina Ribeiro. Photo: Nan Melville



from The Rock School) and Telmo Higinio Gomes Moreira (Escola de Dança do Conservatorio Nacional in Lisbon), whose joie de vivre and easy ballon in his James variation won him the Outstanding European Dancer prize. Another impressive, if a little severe, James was Yoshikazu Asada (Hazaki Koshiba Ballet School), whose clean beats must have helped him to a well deserved 2nd place in the Senior Men's Division.

From Mongolia, Mako Nagasaki, trained by Zaya Tseren, Dashikhagva Dashdamba and Gerelchimeg Khoroldavaa and arguably the most technically gifted woman in the competition, gave a beautifully honed performance. She won the first prize in Senior Women's Division. Francesca Dugarte Romero from Venezuela spun dazzlingly to win the 2nd place, while American Brittany Shinay was memorable for her spirited dancing. Impressive, too, were Brazilians Carolina Neves Ribeiro and Aurora Dickie as Esmeralda and Kitri respectively, and Japanese Risa Mochizuki, also in *Don Q*.

While standing ovations, regardless of the brilliance of the performance, are almost mandatory in some places, they don't ordinarily occur mid-round in ballet competitions. But then Jim Nowakowski, who trains at the Timothy M. Draper Center for

Dance Education in New York, is no ordinary guy. His electric jumps bolt through the air, while his pirouettes spin at full throttle before decelerating under perfect control. His variation from *Diana and Acteon* had the audience ecstatic, and so surely Nowakowski would win the competition's highest accolade, the Grand Prix. But this was not to be. While the 17 year old scooped the first prize in the Senior Men's Division, the coveted Grand Prix went to 18 year old Melissa Hamilton. A nicely proportioned young woman and patently talented, Hamilton shows great promise, but one does not expect an award of this stature - which includes a contract with ABT Studio Company - to go to a competitor who made a complete and utter cods of the grands fouettés at the end of her variation. Presumably she must have impressed the powers that select this prize in an earlier round - or was the award made on potential and physicality as opposed to achievement? Additionally, an honorary Grand Prix - quite why this prize was added was not clear - was awarded to another competitor, Miles E. Perti (International School of Classical Ballet) who, while promising, was by no means the best.

The YAGP, however, does not conclude with the announcement of who's won what; the competition is unique in that it organises a gala in which some of the award winners get to perform alongside some of the world's internationally renowned dancers in the Stars of Today Meet the Stars of Tomorrow Gala held, this year, at New York City Center. As well as offering the chance to see selected individual prize winners again, and sometimes in different solos, the gala programmed a few of the Ensemble Division entries, including first prize winners Formento Artístico Cordobes from Mexico. Featuring a huge cast of diminutive nymphs, Rosario Murillo's *Muy Dentro De La Tierra* might have been just too cute and too long for some but it was received with vociferous delight by others. Takane's *Ballade - Deep in my Heart*, which scooped the second prize, was altogether more inventive.

Outstanding European Dancer Telmo Higino Gomes Moreira got to present his contemporary solo, *Folia*, choreographed by Catarina Moreira, and the extraordinarily supple Camille Bacher, from Ballet Theatre Afrikan in South Africa, gave a memorable account of Kitty Phetla's *Age of Noise*. She shared the Outstanding Contemporary Dancer Award with Charles-Louis Andre Yoshiyama from the ENB School. Whitney Jensen had the good luck to be partnered by Boston Ballet's (non-competing) Reyneris Reyes in a virtuosic pas de deux from the *Pharaoh's Daughter*, and Jim Nowakowski had the place abuzz with yet another sizzling performance.

The second part of the programme, featuring some of the top dancers to be seen in the world today, opened with Paris Opéra étoiles Aurélie Dupont and Manuel Legris, both divine and sensual, in Kylián's *Petite Mort*. The couple also returned near the end of the show in a pas de deux from Neumeier's *La Dame aux Camellias* to demonstrate an even greater emotional and physical intensity - providing a fitting contrast to the evening's more virtuosic offerings, like the pas de deux from *La Esmeralda*, danced with a lovely blend of bravura and sensuality by Cecilia Kerche and Vitor Luiz from Ballet Teatro Municipal in Rio de Janeiro. Gennadi Saveliev - YAGP's President and Executive Director and a leading dancer with ABT - and



Left: Yoshikazu Asada - above: Whitney Jensen and Reyneris Reyes. Photos: Nan Melville.

Xiomara Reyes went hell for leather in that gala heartstopper, *Spring Waters*. Fleetly danced and all over in a breathless flash, one wishes more divers were as brief as this Russian showpiece.

More contemporary, Momix's *Moonbeams*, an excerpt from *Lunar Sea*, had the stage curiously littered with large exercise balls, and Complexions Contemporary Ballet presented the world premiere of *Choke*, choreographed by Dwight Rhoden to a score in the style of Thom Willems by Sergey Gordeev. Danced with rubbery grace and fervour by Rubinald Pronk and Clifford Williams, this was hardly groundbreaking stuff, but exploited the two dancers well. Two pieces of Balanchine: NYCB's Nikolaj Hübbe and ABT's Paloma Herrera were paired for the pas de deux from *Rubies*, but NYCB's Ashley Boulder and SFB's Joseph Phillips (a former YAGP winner) sold an excerpt from *Stars and Stripes* with more convincing bravura. A second world premiere, *Quiet Music*, choreographed by Benjamin Millepied to music by Nico Muhly, afforded a lyrical dance with lots of soaring lifts for another former YAGP alumna, Isabella Boylston (now with ABT) and ABT's David Hallberg, while the New York premiere of Itzik Galili's *Mona Lisa* provided a memorable vehicle to show off the extraordinary plastique of Stuttgart Ballet's Alicia Amatriain, adroitly partnered by Jason Reilly.

Concluding the evening on a veritable high, Royal Ballet dancers Marianela Nuñez and Thiago Soares made the rowdy crowd even rowdier with that indestructible old chestnut *Corsaire*. While Soares did not reach the scorching heights of Angel Corella, in the same role at YAGP's gala a few years back, he gave a personable performance, while Nuñez rattled off her wicked turns with infinite aplomb.

