



Youth America Grand Prix 2009

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STRUCTURE: April 21, 22, 23, at City Center, as YAGP'S 10th anniversary found, as in vocal and instrumental competitions, a large number of contestants from the world over looking for help in making the next step in their career.

This competition attracts over 5000 entrants through pre-trials held throughout the U.S., Brazil, Mexico, Japan and Italy. It results in 300 candidates coming from 30 countries selected to come to New York City for the finals. It is a gigantic undertaking for directors Larissa and Gennadi Saveliev, former dancers in the Bolshoi Ballet (Gennadi still performs with American Ballet Theatre), who founded the Prix in 1999 and have since awarded more than 25,000 young dancers scholarships for further study in leading international schools. The finals present 60 awardees in performance.

Ages range from juniors at 12 to seniors up to 19 years-of-age. Notable finalists this year, as in other years, were the predominant number of Asian contestants as well as a senior from Turkey, (Kadir Okurer, 18); from Romania (Plica Alexandru, 17); and from Portugal (Mariana Rodriguez, 16,); with the rest coming from the USA and European countries.

Outstanding in the junior category was a poised Japanese girl, 12 years of age, performing a variation from "Harliquenade" and eight other 13-year-old girls from the USA, Japan, Korea, and Australia performing variations from 'Don Quixote," "Paquita," "La Bayadere," and other classics.

The choice of a performance

variations for men and women juniors (12-19) ranged from the favorite "Don Quixote," "La Bayadere," "Flames of Paris," "Don Quixote," and "La Esmeralda," along with "Swan Lake," and "Paquita." Choices are made by their teachers. The technique to perform on pointe, do multiple turns, jumps and extensions (flexibility in raising a leg to the side, back and front) must and can be in place at this age. It requires discipline, desire to dance and talent from each candidate. It also poses a question: "Why do the Asians show such taste, charm and attention to detail? A small but important example would be the way they are taught, when walking to another position on stage to gain space and breath during a variation, to never turn off the character's connection with the audience. The attention to detail is exemplary. Our dancers find doing multiple turns and split jumps without the rising curve and descent, sufficient. What is the influence? Arts programs on television? Videos of famous dancers? Is taste inherent? The advantage of tuition from state-run schools?

PERFORMANCE: Part I, a "Stars of today meet the Stars of tomorrow" performance, with talented young finalists performing in age-appropriate works included Skylar Brandt (USA) in a charming "Little Red Riding Hood," "The Jockey Dance" by Bournonville and contributions from members of the Royal Danish Ballet, Orlando Ballet, Stuttgart Ballet, and Pacific Northwest Ballet.

Act I included excerpts from Balanchine's "Who Cares," a charming and sentimental

work performed indifferently by New York City Ballet members, Sara Mearns and Jared Angle and Maria Kowroski, whose "broken wrists" and spiky fingers are not only incorrect form but distracting.

The performance ended with a "Grand Défilé," a finale magically prepared each year by Carlos Dos Santos, Jr. for more than 100 contestants.

Then came a whimsical moment when a representative of the "Guinness Book of Records" presented the Prix with an award for having the most dancers on stage on pointe at one time! The audience found it hilarious. Everyone cheered.

The Part II of "Stars of Today," continued with a messy interpretation of Jules Perrot's famous "Le Grand Pas de Quatre," with members of NYCB, ABT and Mariinsky Ballet totaling eight! Oh, well. The performance dragged on with undistinguished works until redeemed by Cory Stearns (2001 YAGP finalist) and Hee Seo (2003 YAGP winner), both of American Ballet Theatre in a touching and smooth performance of the balcony scene from Kenneth MacMillan's version of "Romeo and Juliet." It was one of the highlights of all the 2009 prix performances.

INNOVATION: Unlike previous years, the Prix added a video presentation: "A Tribute to a Legendary Ballet Teacher, Peter Pestov," in honor of his 80th birthday, with performance by some of his celebrated students later in the program.

Many years ago, class demonstrations were frequent in New York by legendary teachers, who were presented with great success to an invited audience. They were the Russians, mainly from the St. Petersburg (Kirov) school, émigrés from the Russian Revolution (Balanchine) and WW II: Anatole Vilzak, Felia Doubrovska, Vladimir Vladimirov, Anatole Oubokov and others, who had performed in Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and were then without a school, pupils or a place to perform. They taught the West

how to dance. Now, in return the West is teaching the Far East.

After a video presentation about Pestov, introductory remarks were made by Alexei Ratmansky, former director of the Bolshoi Ballet, whose choreographic work for New York City Ballet a few years ago was a resounding success. On May 18, his new work for ABT will be seen. Ratmansky speaks perfect English, is modest and almost reverential when talking about his teacher.

Then there was another "first" for the Prix: a live class demonstration by the graduating class of the John Cranko School of the Stuttgart Ballet. Six young men, accompanied by a pianist, demonstrated a class from the first plié, through tours, adagio movements, beats and big jumps. It was thrilling to see their clean execution, control, poise, musicality and traditional form which silenced the audience into awe.

Part two included performance with some of Pestov's former pupils in traditional works and in new choreography: Yuri Possokhov (SF Ballet) in his version of "Raymonda" pas de deux; Sascha Radetsky (Dutch National Ballet by way of Golovkina's early summer school days in Vail, Colorado and the Bolshoi School) in Hans von Manen's "5 Tangos;" Ratmansky's "Concerto DSCH;" a glorious performance of the pas de deux from MacMillan's "Manon" performed by Marcelo Gomes (originally from Harid Conservatory in Miami) and Viktoria Tereshkina (Mariinsky Ballet); William Forsythe's twister pas de deux "In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated," with members of the Stuttgart and Berlin State Opera Ballet; Vlaimir Makahov (Berlin State Opera Ballet) in a solo work not worthy of his talent; and a finale of "Le Corsaire" pas de trois with three Cuban and one Argentinian dancer; Adiaris Alemida, Herman Cornejo and Joseph Gatti (Corella Ballet), that brought the audience to its feet.

But wait, don't go home yet into the driving wind and rain: Part II: to come were performers from Dmitri Kulev Classical Ballet Academy; Saveliev of ABT and one of the Prix founders in a character dance, "Gopak;" Karine Plantadit and Radetsky in a Tharp in-your-face pas de deux; ending with more Dutch National; Berlin State Opera; Bolshoi and

Maryiinsky Ballet performers in undistinguished works.

Ratmansky made the closing remarks by introducing other Pestov students now teaching in the US, all wearing the Russian de rigor costume, the business suit.

The Prix raises many questions about the level and taste of our unaccredited teaching in schools with weak or nonexistent pedagogy. There is some light just beginning at the JKO school at ABT and in a few other schools. Although talent will always find a way and a place no matter what the handicaps, it needs guidance to find artistry. Perhaps we will get around to national support for the talent we lose for lack of more national schools that fund young student arts education.

WHO MADE THE DECISIONS: judges, teachers and scholarship presenters from the USA, Paris, Dresden, Dutch National, Kirov Academy in Washington, DC; de Vita of ABT's JKO school, Canada National Ballet School; Zurich; Stuttgart; Royal Ballet; Vienna; Australia; Monaco; and New Zealand.

