



WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

2007

Above: Jade Payette and Alex Dutko near Lincoln Center in NYC; near right: Dutko in his own *Venia* for Miami City Ballet; far right: Payette in Trey McIntyre's *Queen of the Goths* with The Washington Ballet





Pointe catches up with four competitors from the 2002 Youth America Grand Prix.

In 2002, four young dancers

BY LISA ARNETT

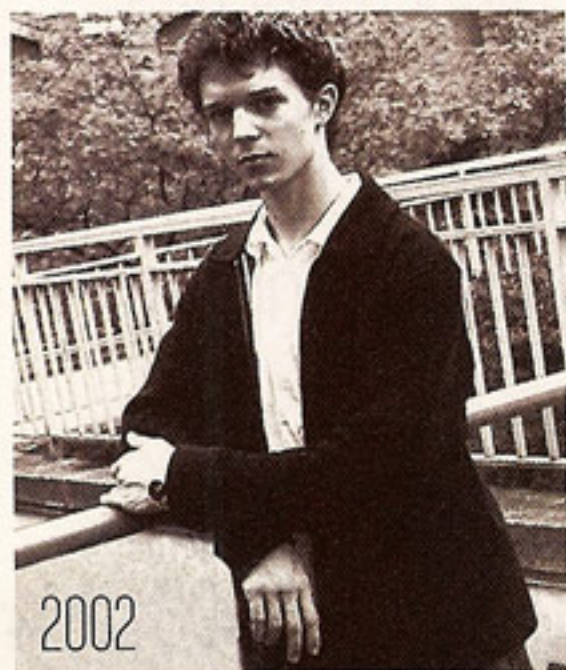
chronicled their experiences competing at Youth America Grand Prix with diary entries for *Pointe* (see "Dear Diary," October/November 2002). All four made it to the finals—some earning medals that year and in later years—and since then, they have also landed spots in companies. We caught up with these four talented professionals, now all in their early 20s, to see what they've been up to: Joseph Phillips of Miami City Ballet, Jade Payette of The Washington Ballet, Alexander Dutko of Ballet Gamonet and Kiri Chapman of Tulsa Ballet.

When Chapman and Payette look back on YAGP, it's not their rankings they remember, but their experiences. "When I did Youth America Grand Prix, it got me looking at other dancers," says Chapman, who placed in the top 12 at her next YAGP competition in 2004. After graduating from the Kirov Academy in Washington, DC, in 2005, Chapman went on several company auditions and was offered a corps contract with Tulsa Ballet. She has continued to attend competitions such as USA International Ballet Competition and New York International Ballet Competition during her summers off from the company. "I had such a nice time [at YAGP] because I got to meet so many dancers and see how they train," she says. "And, of course, just watching them perform is really one of the best learning experiences I've ever had."

"I don't think competitions are about competition all the time. It's about your personal growth as a dancer." —JADE PAYETTE

Since joining Tulsa, Chapman's most memorable moments include performing with the corps in landmark ballets such as *Serenade* and *Swan Lake*. "I hadn't gotten to dance a lot of Balanchine works before, so *Serenade* was really special," she says. "I also loved doing *Swan Lake* last year. It was so beautiful and the whole production was kind of like what I'd been trained for so long to do." At presstime, Chapman was rehearsing Michael Smuin's *Romeo and Juliet*.

For Payette, attending YAGP provided



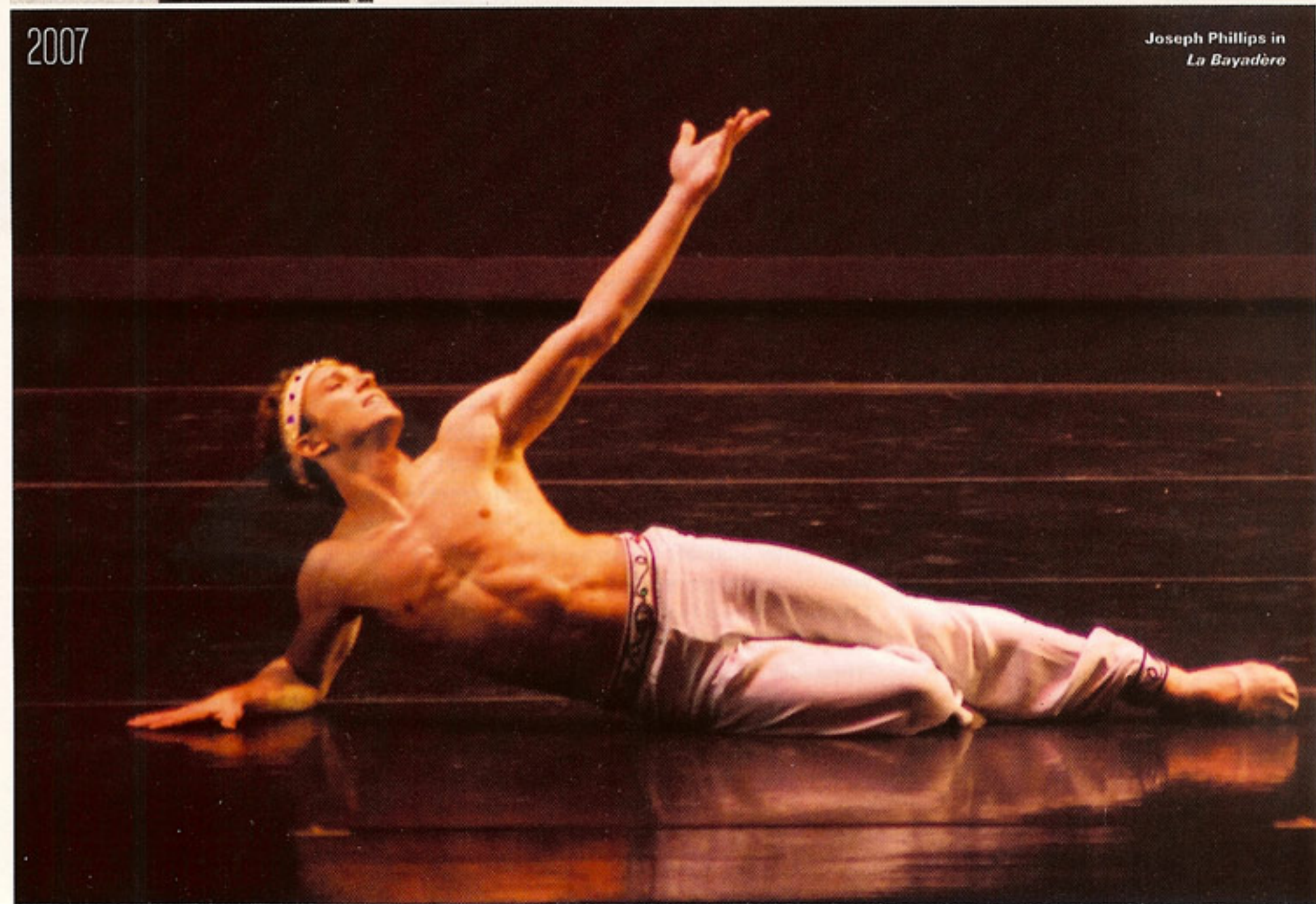
2002

a new avenue not only to perform, but also to meet people in the ballet community. "You get to really network and meet other dancers your age and talk to directors of other schools," she says. After making it to the finals in 2002, Payette returned to YAGP in 2003, when she earned women's silver, and in 2004, when she placed second again and also won a scholarship to The Royal Ballet School. "It was entirely a shock. [RBS] is one of the places you dream of going to as a student of ballet, but it was so high up on a pedestal it was almost untouchable," she says. "I don't think I actually would have seriously thought about auditioning there, but once I got the opportunity, I had to jump at the chance."

Payette was plagued by two shin stress fractures and tendonitis in her knees during her time at RBS. She returned to the U.S. the following year to attend American Ballet Theatre's summer program as a national training scholarship student. Shortly after, she attended company class at The Washington Ballet by recommendation of her mentor, Rebecca Wright, and

was asked to join its studio company. She became an apprentice last season and a full company member in September 2007. Payette now recalls her competition years as a time of growth. "I don't think competitions are about competition all the time," she says. "It's about your personal growth as a dancer, to be able to get up that courage to actually be onstage and be objectively looked at by ballet legends. It definitely helped me to come out of my shell and to have confidence onstage."

As a professional, Payette has been able to employ those polished performing skills onstage. One of Payette's memorable moments with the company early on was performing in Christopher Wheeldon's *Morphoses*. "That was the first time I think that I was onstage and I really felt like I was a real dancer, a real ballerina," she says. And when another dancer was injured in rehearsal, Payette was thrust into the spotlight to perform a challenging pas de deux peppered with speedy turns, leaps and throws in Septime Webre's *Juanita y Alicia*. "We had two days to get



2007

Joseph Phillips in
La Bayadère

Rena Michino

this pas de deux together before we got onstage," she says. "That was a defining moment when I felt I was strong enough to keep up."

Phillips not only took the men's gold medal at YAGP in 2002, but he also won first place at the USA IBC and Prague International Ballet Competition later the same year. After graduating from North Carolina School of the Arts in 2003, he sent videos and resumé to several companies. A few months later, San Francisco Ballet Artistic Director Helgi Tomasson offered him a contract, sight unseen. At age 17, he headed across the country and spent four years dancing in the corps. Looking for more stage time and the freedom to accept outside guesting gigs, Phillips made the move to MCB under the direction of Edward Villella, who, ironically, had offered Phillips a contract back in 2003 after he had already accepted his position at SFB. Since joining the company in June 2007 as a soloist, he has been coached by Villella in Balanchine's challenging *Tarantella* and has accepted a few guest artist opportunities that continue to come his way.

While Phillips can draw a straight line from his competition wins to his first job, Dutko asserts, "my career as a professional dancer was not a result of Youth America Grand Prix," he says. "It was a great experience, but ... I was still a dancer who had to go out and audition." Dutko placed in YAGP's top six in 2002, and competing again the next year won him a scholarship to Universal Ballet Academy, where he studied briefly before becoming a founding student at the then-just-opened Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School at ABT. He trained there from age 16 to 18, dancing a varied rep, performing with the ABT Studio Company for its 10th anniversary and working with Donald Mahler and Jessica Lang.

Dutko did find his YAGP experience coming into play when it came time to audition. "The competition was like one big audition. People are watching you constantly, so it helped me to become more comfortable under that sort of pressure," he says. Learning classical



Kiri Chapman in the party scene of Marcello Angelini's *The Nutcracker*

Christopher Jean-Richard



variations—and watching countless others—can also act as a practical study course for company life. "It is always good to learn new roles and variations. Since becoming a professional, I have recognized a lot of variations and I credit that from learning them for YAGP." After a

series of auditions, he accepted a contract with MCB, where he most recently choreographed his own neoclassical work, *Venia*, featuring himself and two other company members.

Looking for a change, in August 2007, Dutko joined Miami's Ballet Gamonet, a fairly new company directed by Jimmy Gamonet De Los Heros. Dutko is now the youngest male dancer in that ensemble company, performing alongside idols such as Iliana Lopez and Paul Thrussell. "One thing that I've learned since I was 15 and in YAGP is at that time, I just wanted to be successful, wanted to rush things along, wanted to be in a company at 16," he says. "That's everybody's dream at the time, but then you realize that your time as a student is a lot more crucial to your career than getting in fast. And it means so much more." □

Lisa Arnett is an arts writer based in Chicago.