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DANCE REVIEW

A soaring tribute to Soviet-era ballet star

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NEW YORK — Nobody deserves a gala tribute more than Vladimir Vasiliev, the heroic Russian ballet star honored on Saturday at New York City Center at the end of the annual Youth America Grand Prix competition.

Vasiliev, now 69, defined the image of the Russian male dancer for his generation. Onstage, he appeared to be a superman, and his astonishing physical power, sex appeal and bold, dramatic artistry gave the world a legend.

These qualities belonged to Vasiliev personally. Despite sharing the superb academic training that channeled his talent in dance, he was one of a kind, and significantly he did not owe his image to anyone else — not to the Soviet state, and not to choreographer Yuri Grigorovich, whose works Vasiliev made convincing. Vasiliev's artistry gave them a cover. Ironically it was in a portrait of defeat — as Spartacus the rebellious gladiator — that he most famously projected the illusion of creative freedom and Soviet invincibility.

Rounded out with film clips of the dancer in his prime, Saturday's program presented a host of contemporary ballet stars, many of them Russian and some performing Vasiliev's own choreography.

Ballerina Carla Fracci, a legend in



Vladimir Vasiliev and Bolshoi dancer Daria Khokhlova in a piece created for the tribute gala at New York on Saturday.

her own right, introduced the festivities, and the evening concluded with a "pièce d'occasion" in which Vasiliev showed himself still fully capable of seizing the spotlight.

His style of Bolshoi brawn was not the centerpiece of this evening, however. Apart from Vasiliev himself, and the Royal Ballet's Ivan Putrov, ballerinas dominated the event. The exception was in choreographer Kasyan Goleizovsky's "Narcissus," a clever staging of the Greek myth in which a shadow on the backdrop suggests the title-character's reflection. As Narcissus, a wild-eyed jungle boy who succumbs to vanity, Putrov projected

phenomenal authority.

The Mariinsky Ballet, despite its current troubles, continues to produce superb stylists like Yevgenia Obraztsova, who displayed exquisite polish as a shimmering and elusive Sylphide, and as a lovelorn dreamer in Vasiliev's "Sentimental Waltz."

Polina Semionova is an honest dancer, wonderfully musical and with a stunning line, but she has difficulty choosing repertoire that shows this candor to advantage. She should be dancing unaffected works by Balanchine — not overwrought MacMillan, and definitely not Zanella. In Béjart's "Romeo and

Juliet," Semionova found herself well matched with David Hallberg, and took naturally to an ingénue role. She looked fantastic.

Similarly Vasiliev's flirtatious "Tarantella" seemed the perfect choice for live-wire ballerina Ashley Bouder. A "Macbeth" pas de deux, also by Vasiliev, had little to recommend itself, even while offering Veronika Part the chance to create a snaky portrait of Lady Macbeth, long legs hooking around her partner.

Perhaps because the repetition of classical set pieces at the competition can become tiresome, the competition now underscores variety at its galas (there were three this year). On Saturday, the program included folk dancers from the Moiseyev Dance Company, and the sly and sensuous ballroom partners Anna Melnikova and Slavik Kryklyvyy.

The risk is taking this openness too far and larding the event with worthless novelties.

The Youth America Grand Prix has launched an "Emerging Choreographers Series," which, on Friday, offered the premiere of Susan Jaffe's "Sognato," happily one of the few new works possessing a sense of dramatic timing that underscored key gestures. Isabella Boylston and Blaine Hoven danced it fluently.

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