

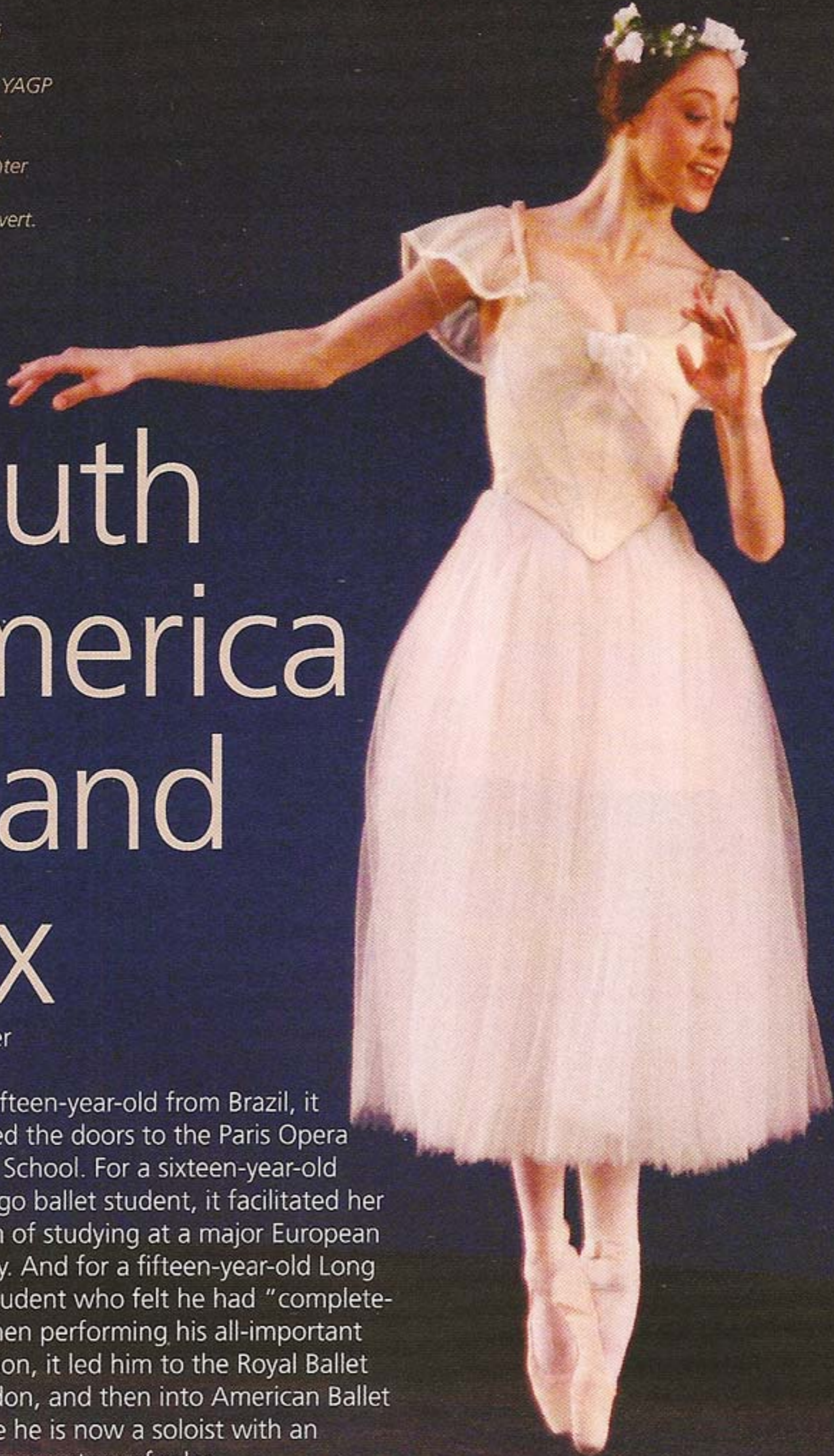
*Angelina Zuccarini
(Stuttgart Ballet)
performing at the YAGP
10th Anniversary
All-Alumni Gala at
New York City Center
on April 22, 2009.
Photo by Nina Alover.*

Youth America Grand Prix

By Susan Reiter

For a fifteen-year-old from Brazil, it opened the doors to the Paris Opera Ballet School. For a sixteen-year-old Chicago ballet student, it facilitated her dream of studying at a major European ballet academy. And for a fifteen-year-old Long Island ballet student who felt he had "completely choked" when performing his all-important classical variation, it led him to the Royal Ballet School in London, and then into American Ballet Theatre, where he is now a soloist with an ever-expanding repertory of roles.

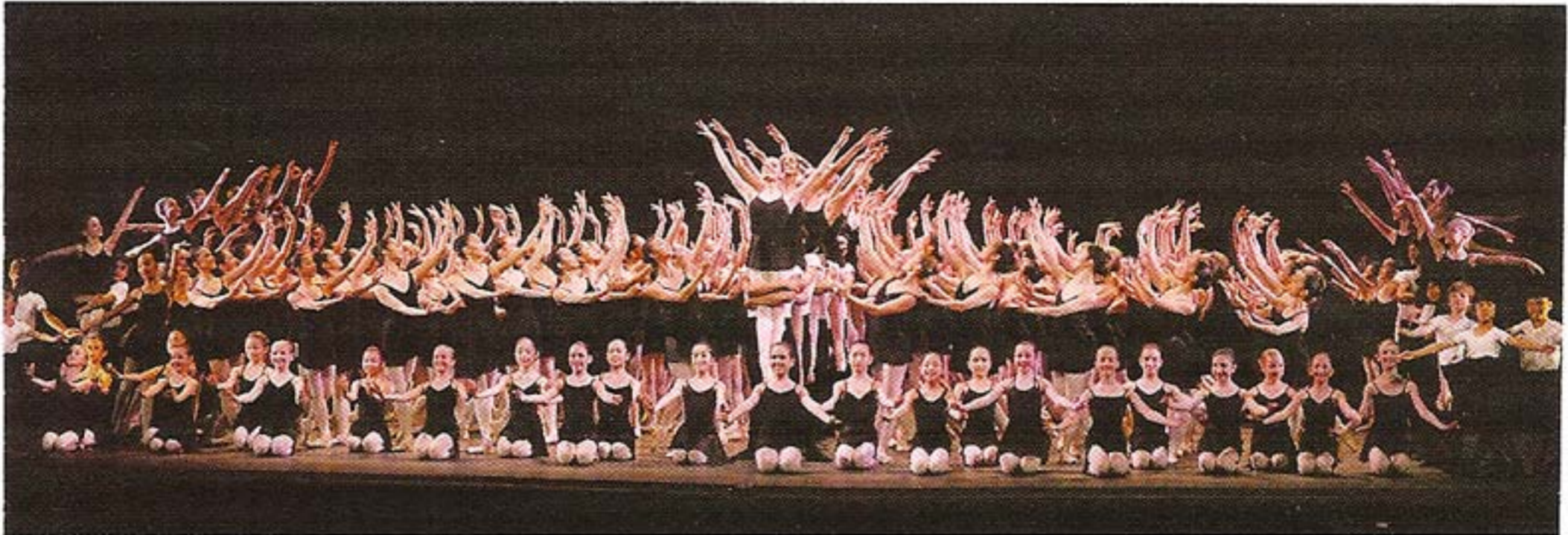
These three alumni of Youth America Grand Prix exemplify the way this special competition, founded in 1999, offers dancers many opportunities to advance their careers beyond winning medals—although it definitely awards those too.



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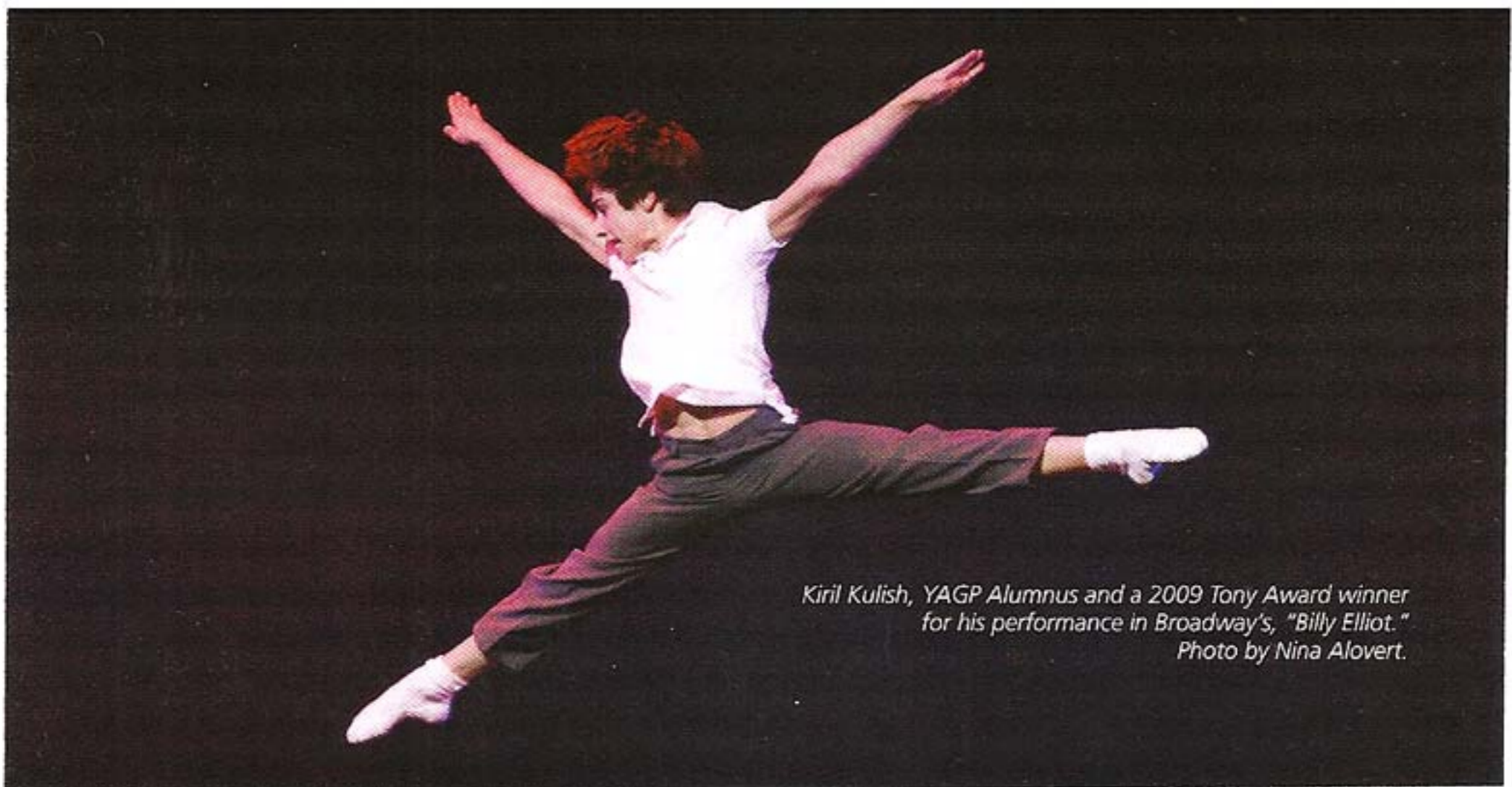
Youth America Grand Prix 2009 NYC Finalists on the stage of New York City Center after breaking the Guinness World Record for “Most Ballet Dancers en Pointe.” Photo by Nan Melville.

For the 300 young dancers (ages 9 to 19, divided into three age categories) who assemble in New York this month, YAGP means a chance to be observed in classes, rehearsals and performances by the directors of major ballet schools and companies. Scholarships are its primary, and invaluable, focus. “We try to present ourselves as an educational organization, rather than a competition,” says Larissa Saveliev, YAGP’s co-founder (with her husband Gennadi Saveliev) and artistic director. She estimates that at least one-third of the 150 senior-level dancers (ages 15–19) who make it to New York—after competing in regional semi-final rounds—receive scholarships.

That was definitely the case for each of three young dancers, now in highly regarded professional companies, who participated in YAGP and credit it with giving their careers a crucial, and irreplaceable, boost. “I would not be in ABT if I had not gone to the Royal Ballet School,” asserts Cory Stearns, who has danced with ABT since 2006 and was promoted to soloist in 2009. Gailene Stock, the school’s director, saw his potential after his contemporary performance and offered a scholarship—and was not dissuaded when his performance of the Black Swan solo went badly and he didn’t advance to the all-important final round.

“Luckily, despite my terrible performance, Gailene Stock saw something and she really launched my career.” When ABT was performing in London last year, Stearns had a chance to ask how she had overlooked his sloppy—and at the time, personally devastating—classical performance. “She said she had seen, from the beginning, a maturity in my dancing. She really took a risk.”

Stock also played a role in Paolo Arrais’ career. Now 22 and a member of Alonzo King’s



Kiril Kulish, YAGP Alumnus and a 2009 Tony Award winner for his performance in Broadway’s, “Billy Elliot.” Photo by Nina Alover.

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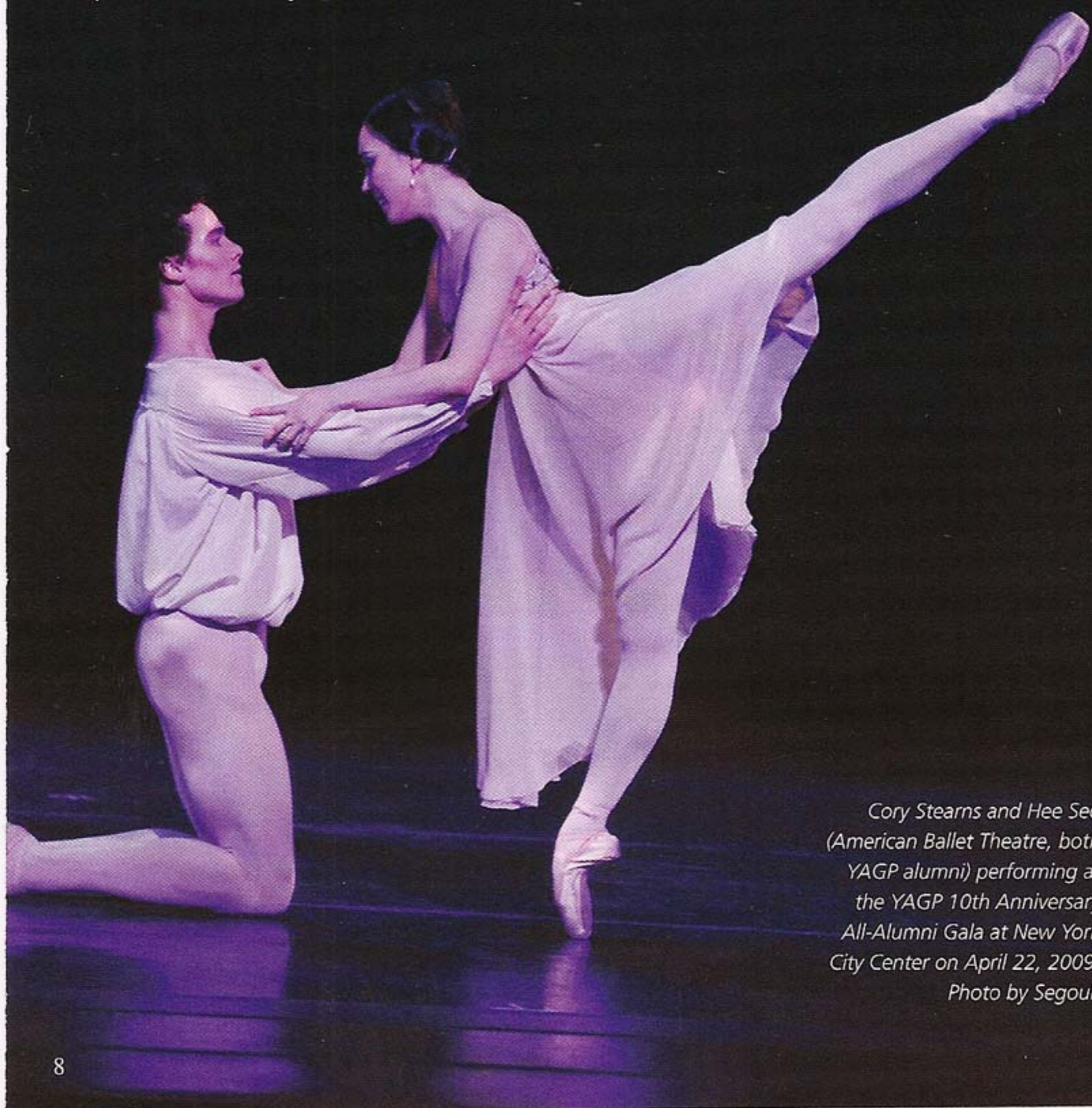
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LINES Contemporary Ballet, he came to the 2003 YAGP at 15 from his native Brazil. (That country is now one of four where YAGP discovers international talent at regional semi-final rounds, which also take place in ten American cities.) “I came to the competition focused on the idea of a scholarship, because I wanted to study abroad. The Paris Opera Ballet School offered me a scholarship,” he said recently from Pittsburgh, where LINES was on tour. Three months later, Arrais moved to Paris. “The experience was great. It was a big change—culturally, and also the discipline at POB was really rough, but it was so important for me to go through that because I grew a lot from that.”

When he graduated after two years, “I was still really young, and wanted to study more. So I went to London and auditioned for the Royal Ballet School, where Gailene Stock remembered me from the competition. She gave me a scholarship, and I stayed there one year.” Following two years with Norwegian National Ballet, he was drawn to more contemporary choreography and is now in his first season with the San Francisco-based troupe.

Angelina Zuccarini participated in YAGP’s Chicago programs from an early age, and in 2003 came to the New York City finals. Then 16, she won the gold medal in the senior women’s division, which included a scholarship to one of several schools. “I decided on Stuttgart because I thought it would be the best fit for me. Originally, I wasn’t even planning to join the Stuttgart Ballet. I was just going to go for a year, get some European experience, then try to work in the States.”



*Cory Stearns and Hee Seo
(American Ballet Theatre, both
YAGP alumni) performing at
the YAGP 10th Anniversary
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City Center on April 22, 2009.
Photo by Segoul.*

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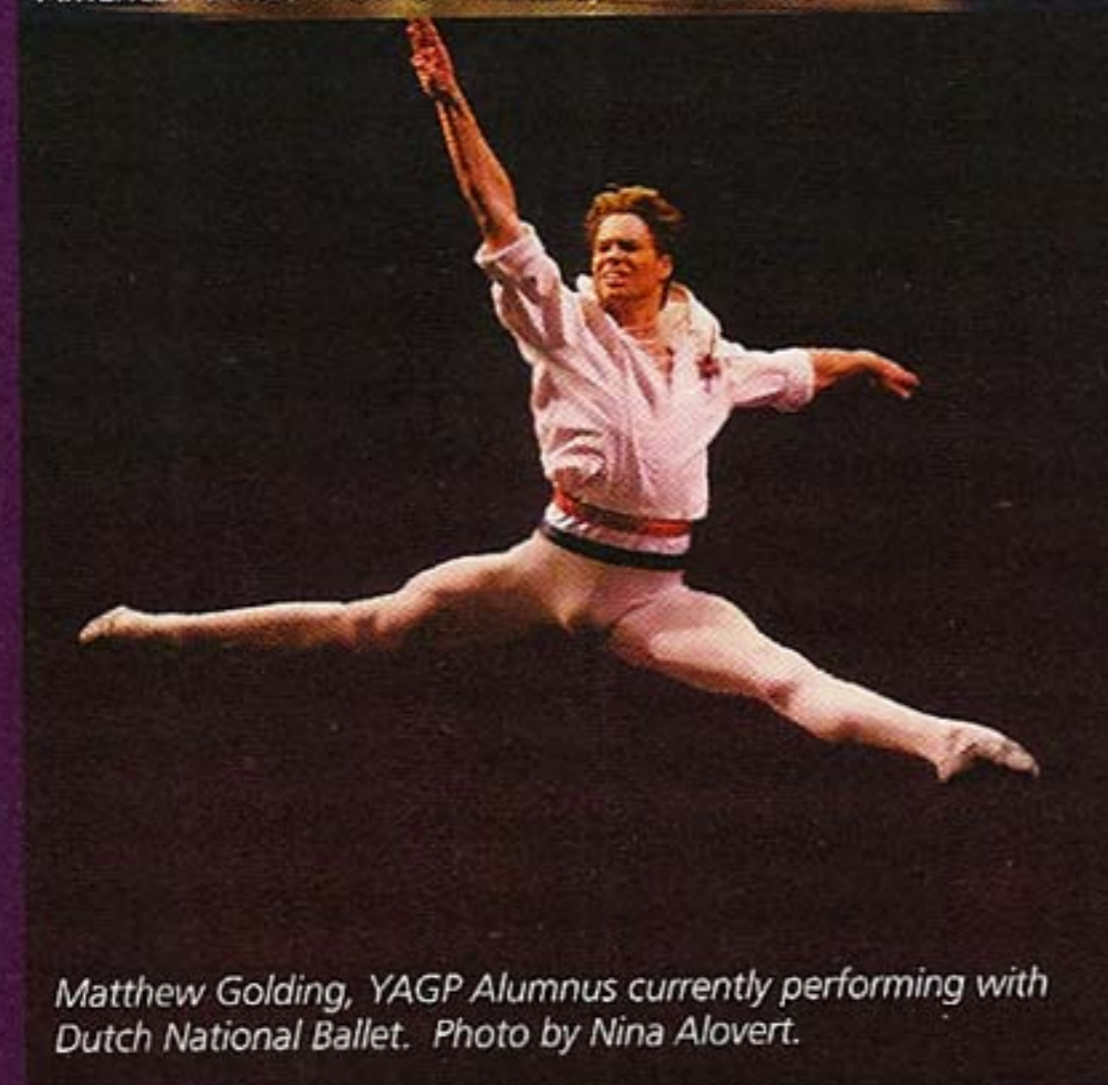
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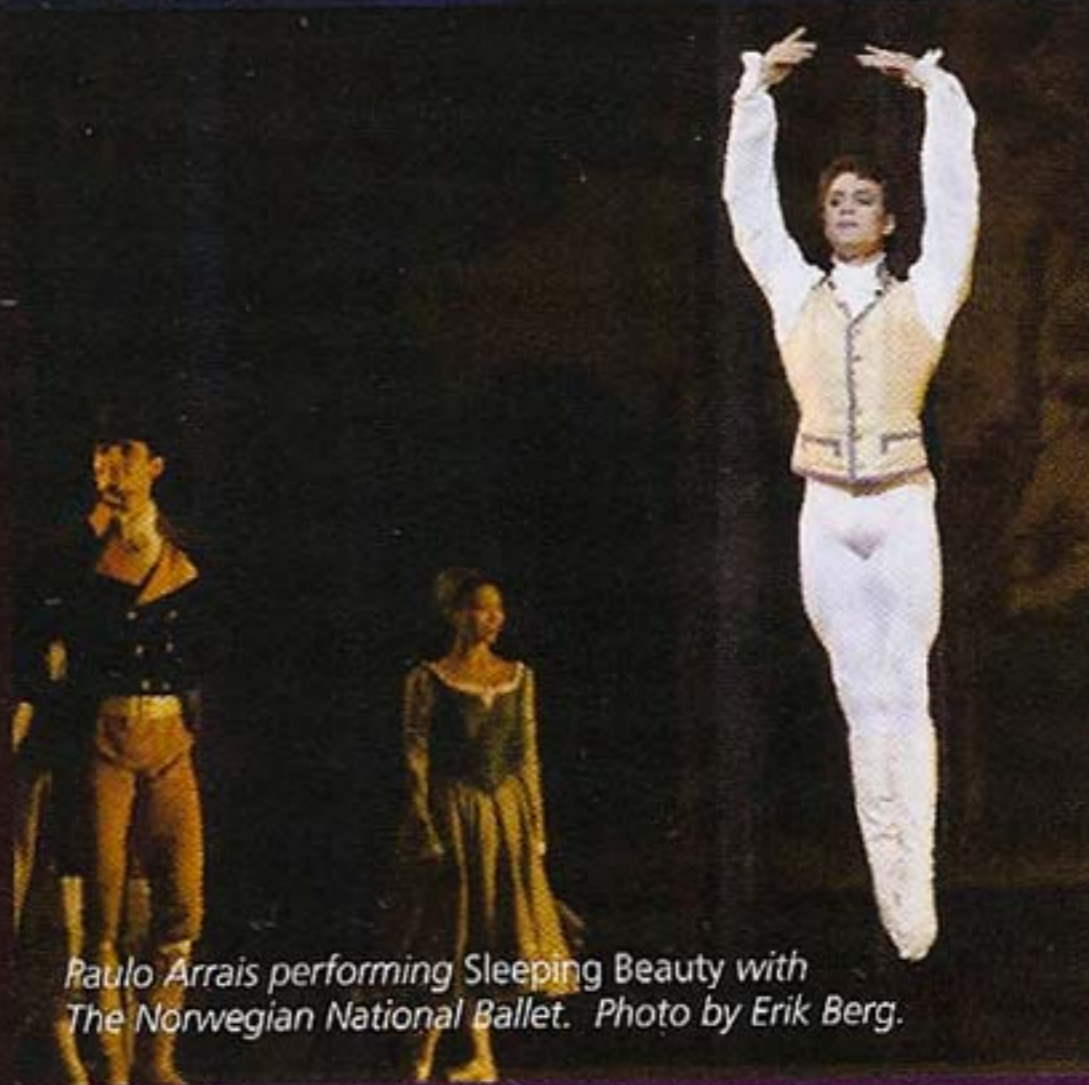
Christine Schevchenko, Melanie Hamrick, Katherine Williams, and Mary Thomas, YAGP Alumni currently performing with American Ballet Theatre. Photo by Nina Alover.



Bridgett Zehr, YAGP Alumna, and Zdenek Konvalina currently performing with the National Ballet of Canada. Photo by Segoul.



Matthew Golding, YAGP Alumnus currently performing with Dutch National Ballet. Photo by Nina Alover.



Paulo Arrais performing Sleeping Beauty with The Norwegian National Ballet. Photo by Erik Berg.

But Zuccarini never left, and was speaking from her Stuttgart home before heading off to company class and a performance. When she completed the two-year upper-school program her scholarship covered, she was invited to join the company. “During my second year in school, I had started working with the company, learning corp roles. The transition was very smooth.” Now a demi-soloist with a growing repertory, Zuccarini describes her situation there as “super-happy.”

And it all began when YAGP made the scholarship a possibility. “That’s the great thing about the competition. There are school directors from all around the world there. And they give you a perspective of what they had to offer, to see if that’s a good fit for you,” Zuccarini said.

Each dancer appreciates the crucial role YAGP played in their still-young careers. Arrais asserts, “If it wasn’t for the competition, I don’t think I would have ever left Brazil. YAGP just opened all the doors for me.” Zuccarini remarked, “I’m so grateful for the competition. It gave me the opportunity, the experience, the exposure to a world beyond ballet in America.” And Stearns feels that without what YAGP made available to him, “I could never have made it to ABT. I needed the change of perspective. I needed to become dedicated to the art, and that’s really what saved, and propelled, my career.” **P**