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World-class review of ballet and dance.

A GRAND EVENING

It was a lovefest at the David H. Koch Theater last Thursday for the Youth America Grand Prix's 25th Anniversary Gala performance. As galas go, the night was awash in pageantry. Patrons and post-show dinner attendees arrived at Lincoln Center in glamorous attire. Between performers, there were filmed messages from notable past winners on how YAGP has changed their lives, speeches from movie actors (Richard Kind came with Dad jokes and carried a gracious applause for the ballet parents), and much mention and praise for Larissa Savaliev, YAGP's visionary founder and artistic director.

Performance

YAGP 25th Anniversary Gala

Place

David H. Koch Theater, Lincoln Center,
New York, NY, April 18, 2024

Words

Josephine Minhinnett



There was a lot to celebrate. As the world's largest youth ballet scholarship audition, YAGP has been connecting students to the top ballet schools and companies since 1999. Effectively, making dancers' dreams come true for the last 25 years. Congress recently passed a resolution to officially recognize the cultural contribution of YAGP as the national youth dance competition of the US.



As is their tradition in anniversary years, YAGP held two gala evenings in succession to close its week of New York City Finals that this year, saw 500 youth ages 9-19 compete from April 11-17. Both the Thursday and Friday night galas featured a star-studded program of YAGP alumni from the top ballet companies plus international guest artists in a range of classical and contemporary works, interspersed with short solo and group numbers from select youth finalists. Thursday night's bill included dance artists from the US,

France, The Netherlands, England, and Germany. All were commendable, but American Ballet Theatre artists, just back from a tour of “Wolf Works” in California, dominated the program with their all-American conviviality and charm.

Case in point was the world premiere of James Whiteside's “More Than Nothing” danced by ABT principals Isabella Boylston and Catherine Hurlin with soloist Jake Roxander. Set to an arrangement of the catchy samba tune “Mas Que Nada” performed live on-stage by pianist Matthew Whitaker and decked out in lively primary colors—red and blue bodysuits with tassel skirts for Boylston and Hurlin respectively, a yellow unitard for Roxander—the piece was full of cheery showmanship and Latin warmth.

Roxander, who was made soloist just last month after less than two years in the corps, breezed through a solo of quadruple pirouettes and turns in second. A clear strength. On his heels, Boylston was all power in a diagonal of travelling arabesques and a phrase of daring side extensions sharply clipped into twists in fourth en pointe. Hurlin, brought just as much personality, as she sailed through Italian fouettés and caught Roxander mid-jump with a grin. As a group, they served sibling energy, dancing shoulder-to-shoulder before circling around and breaking through to upstage each other. (A line from the Brazilian Portuguese lyrics translates to “Get out of my way, I want to pass”). I chuckled at the hammed machismo ending. It was completely goofy but by now, we'd been won over. Samba-inspired yet true-to-ballet, Whiteside's choreography is in constant, flowing motion, and above all, knows how to have fun.

In the second world premiere of the night, director of Nashville Ballet II, Maria Konrad, took a quieter approach with her contemporary ballet duet “Dea” featuring Adjani Cissoko from Alonzo King LINES Ballet in San Francisco with Vsevolod Maievskyi, a YAGP alum who joined English National Ballet as a junior soloist last year after being displaced by the war in Ukraine.

The work's main attraction is an enormous costume that is also scenography. The lights ascended on Cissoko at center, wrapped in a deep red taffeta skirt that spanned the length of the stage. An image of grandeur. She fanned her arms up and down—a cross between white swan and goddess raising the earth—then, slowly, deliciously, we saw her *développé* to the side, an

impossibly long leg lifting the fabric into a new set of lights and shadows. (The skirt concept is reminiscent of Jessica Lang's "Splendid Isolation II," which was shown at YAGP's 2011 Ballet Grand Prix Tour.)

A night dedicated to ballet excellence would not have been complete without story ballets excerpts. Stuttgart Ballet principal dancers Elisa Badenes and Martí Paixà gave an outstanding performance of the final scene in John Cranko's "Onegin." A fitting choice given the ballet was created on the company. Badenes was a firm Tatiana (I read her coldness as anger) against the pleading, yearning Paixà as Onegin. Every gesture in their wrenching pas de deux was infused with an emotional persuasion that for many dancers would take a lifetime to master. The audience erupted with applause. And I was left with an immediate urge to see the full ballet.

ABT soloist Chloe Misseldine with principal Aran Bell dazzled in the adagio from "Le Corsaire Suite," Misseldine looking resplendent in a purple tutu and tiara. In the coda, principal dancer Constantine Allen from the Dutch National Ballet had a little trouble filling out the music, but nicely executed his manège of grand jetés and double tours before ABT corps dancer Elisabeth Beyer carried the fouetté section. It was a whirlwind of variations. And somewhat confusingly, in the middle of the Suite, Paris Opera Ballet sujet Bianca Scudamore performed the Gamzatti variation from "La Bayadère." A potent turner, her reverse diagonal of triple attitude turns landing in arabesque was truly miraculous.

Brady Farrar from ABT Studio Company appeared buoyant in a "Flight of the Bumblebee" solo of his own making; NDT1 dancer Jon Bond who has been with the company for nearly a decade brilliantly rippled through the micro-movements of Ekman's jazzy "Tuplet," a joy to watch; an unstoppable Nnamdi Nwagwu ran...ran...ran, rolled, and rebounded in a triumphal contemporary solo "Tito!" for his New York debut; and NYCB's Isabelle LaFreniere who was promoted to principal just last year proved delightfully easy to watch in an excerpt from Balanchine's "Who Cares?"

The large crowd-pleaser of the night was Christian Spuck's spoof ballet "Le Grand Pas de Deux" with ABT's Skylar Brandt and Daniel Camargo. Created in 2000, the piece got on the prix circuit in 2017 when it was performed during the Prix de Lausanne interlude by Lauren Cuthbertson and Alexander Jones. Here, the ABT duo played up the hysterics with just the right amount of jerkiness, purse swinging, and kerfuffle to nail comedic effect. It only works because their technique is flawless to begin with. For instance, in the iconic "Grand Pas Classique" step, Brandt balances in passé as Camargo completes his double tour, then kneel in unison. And even their heel kicks have a precision absent from other interpretations. In this version, the purse ejects sparkling confetti—not once, but twice—as it hits the floor, much befitting of an anniversary occasion.

The theater resounded with cheers and applause throughout the mixed program, not only for the technical feats of the stars, but for all they symbolized for the young finalists—a successful future at a world-renowned dance company.

Among the young "stars of tomorrow" who performed on Thursday were 10-year-old Owen Simmons (the School of Cadence Ballet, Canada) who won this year's Hope Award in the pre-competitive category; 13-year-old Annie Webb (Moga Conservatory of Dance, UT) who danced a "Giselle" variation and won 2nd place in the junior division; 18-year-old Martinho Lima Santos (Princess Grace Academy, Portugal/Monaco) who was awarded first place in the senior men division; and 15-year-old Crystal Huang (Bayer Ballet, CA/Rock Center for Dance, NV) who won silver in the senior women division and danced a contemporary solo "Valse Masquerade" by Brady Farrar. Busy and accomplished, Huang and Lima Santos had already won awards at the Prix de Lausanne earlier this year. To top it off, there was a wonderful ensemble of Ukrainian folk dance (Phoenix Ballet & Master Ballet Academy) that split-jumped and barrel-turned to the audience's amazement. In one of the pauses between pieces as the stage was being reset, an audio recording of distinguished prima ballerina Natalia Makarova played alongside photos of her. As though speaking to this younger generation of dancers she says, "Give the audience the best of your heart." And if I may attest, that is exactly what they did.

Josephine Minhinnett

Jo is an artsworker and writer from Toronto. She graduated with an M.A. in Photographic Preservation from Ryerson University and has worked in museums and archives across Canada and the U.S. In the field of dance, she is interested in creative practices that challenge traditional ideas of performance. Jo trained at Canada's National Ballet School and the École Supérieure de Danse de Cannes Rosella Hightower.