

Sung Woo Han.



Clare Soley



Vixtor Acosta

YAGP

EMMA MANNING
reports on this year's
Youth America Grand
Prix in New York

Photos: Dance Europe

2011



Hinano Eto



Maria Petin



Aran Bell



Giacomo Rovero



Yali Sun



Anastasia Bertinshaw



Kozue Tashiro



Tudor Paul
Moldoveanu



Hannah Kulas



Blake Kessler



Min Jung Kim



Asuka Tsuchida



Above: Mayara Magri V. Da Graça; right: Surimu Fukushi. Photos: E.Kauldhar/Dance Europe

YAGP 2011

Following preliminary rounds at the Skirball Center, the finals of 12th Youth America Grand Prix were staged at the New York City Center on 21 March. Perhaps one of the remarkable things about this year's competition was the number of Japanese participants - bearing in mind that their homeland had been devastated by the ultimate force of nature the previous week - who gave such accomplished performances despite their personal grief. No fewer than three talented 12 year olds - Sae Maeda, Shiori Midorikawa and Rina Kanehara - opened the Junior Women's section, demonstrating technical abilities way beyond their years, and their professionalism was humbling.

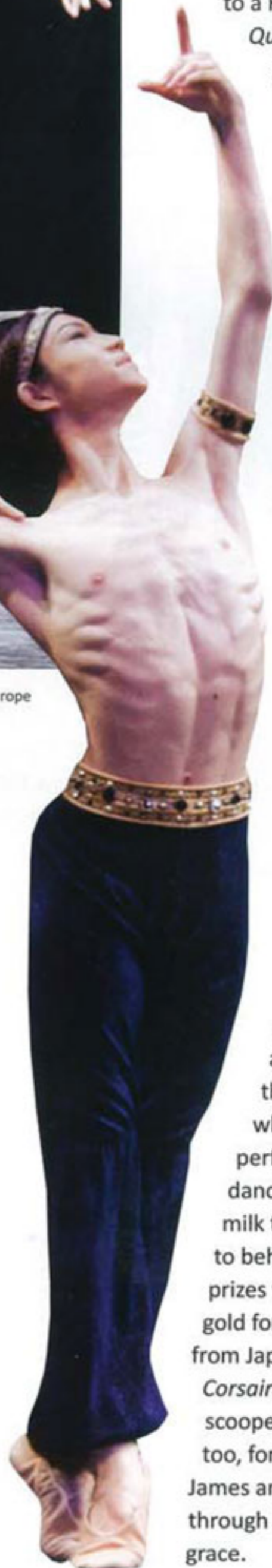
Unfortunately some of the other juniors, in their quest for technical feats, were less successful. One young American lady, intent on wrenching her leg to the heavens, nearly knocked herself out at the start of her *Bayadère* variation. But she wasn't the only culprit! Many striving for extreme extensions revealed the Herculean effort - and a 12 o'clock extension is somewhat fruitless if the hands are clenched and the arms ungainly. Multiple turns, too, were sometimes pursued with over-enthusiastic vigour, but for Tyler Donatelli pirouettes caused no stress whatsoever. She spun off one

quadruple after another in a very showy opening diagonal to her *Bayadère* solo to win the bronze medal. The junior silver, meanwhile, went to Paula Alves with a feisty *Esmeralda*, and the gold to Hannah Bettes, who whipped off a cracking manège.

Three Japanese women also caught the eye in the Senior Women's category: Atsu Watanabe and Kozue Tashiro (who won the gold) with beautifully danced *Paquita* variations, and Asuka Tsuchida, who not only nailed every technical hurdle in her *Esmeralda*, but also imbued what is undeniably a soubrette dance with an emotional depth. She won Dance Europe's Artistry Prize, and surely has a promising career in front of her. Resplendent in red, American Hannah Kulas breezed through a *Bayadère* to scoop the silver medal, while the bronze went to a Korean dancer, Min Jung Kim, for her assured *Don Quixote*. The ladies also won the Grand Prix, which was given to Brazilian Mayara Magri V. Da Graça for her exemplary *Black Swan*. Other women who caught the eye included Yali Sun from Beijing, suggesting her ballerina potential with her delicate *Aurora*, and Cuban Gabriela Mesa Ochoa for her bold *Black Swan*, if a little spoilt by over-stylised hands. Mention also is due for three ladies who didn't make the finals - Clara Soley with a polished *Esmeralda*, Anastasia Bertinshaw for her gracious *Giselle* and Hinano Eto for her easy split jetés.

Onto the junior men category, in which our critical faculties are inevitably challenged by the sheer cuteness of the youngest boys. They may be listed as 12 year olds, but several of them would pass for eight, so when they deliver the manly technical tricks with aplomb, we cannot help but smile. I was smitten by Reo Morikawa in a neat variation from *Fille*, but the judges gave the gold to Italian Giacomo Rovero; the silver to American Blake Kessler and the bronze to Giuseppe Bausillio from Switzerland - all three exceedingly promising young men. The junior Grand Prix went to Aran Bell from Italy, who has an astonishingly assured technique for a 12 year old.

The senior men's category attracted some curiosity, in that two men from Cuba were competing. This is the first time that Cubans have been granted visas for many years, and so it was good to welcome Victor Manuel Estevez Acosta and Miguel Eduardo Anaya Rodriguez, along with the aforementioned Cuban woman, to New York. But while both Acosta and Rodriguez gave commendable performances, neither suggested any joy in their dancing and both made the awful mistake of trying to milk the audience's applause. Perhaps they had been told to behave like stars, but it did them no favours. Instead the prizes went to Sung Woo Han from Korea, who won the gold for his elegant variation from *Beauty*; Surimu Fukushi from Japan, who was awarded the silver for his feline *Corsaire*; and Junzong (Jake) Zhao from Washington, who scooped the bronze with his soaring *Siegfried*. A mention, too, for both Gong Yi Wen from Beijing for his buoyant James and Tudor-Paul Moldoveanu from Romania, who flew through the male variation from *Esmeralda* with long-limbed grace.



Asuka Tsuchida

YUKI NAGANO meets the recipient of Dance Europe's Outstanding Artistry Award at the YAGP

Tell us how you started ballet.

I have a sister who is senior to me by five years and was studying ballet. When I watched the video of her school performance, I was mesmerised by her beautiful costume.

Starting with this simple, childish adoration, ballet soon became an essential part of my life. To concentrate on ballet training, I went on to a high school that was close to my studio, and walked straight to the classes after school, three times a week. Although I have lessons every day during the period preparing for a competition, my teacher has a strict policy that there shouldn't be overtime sessions, so I have never stayed at the studio after nine o'clock in the evening.

Why did you enter the Youth America Grand Prix?

I wanted to find a job as a professional dancer this year, and I hoped I might find opportunities at YAGP.

Why did you choose Esmeralda as your classical variation?

It is a choice by my teacher, Mrs. Ritsuko Tsubota. Some time ago, I had a kind of fiasco in a national competition in Japan with Esmeralda. Mrs. Tsubota was afraid that I might feel belittled every time I had to dance this ballet in the future after the bitter experience, and decided that I should try again to overcome the fear. I think I did well both in terms of technique and of expression this time. I could regain my self-esteem by being appreciated in such a big arena as YAGP, and in Mrs. Tsubota's eyes, too; I started to love this variation.

What do you think are the important points of this variation?

I focused on the expressive side of the choreography, not the virtuosity. I tried to understand the mind of the young Esmeralda, her hardships as a Gypsy girl, and nevertheless the cheerful quality blazing in her. How much of them I could infuse in my dancing was my target.

Did you enjoy the New York final?

Absolutely. This was the third time I joined the competition, so I felt relaxed and could enjoy. It is great that at the YAGP we can take classes led by renowned teachers and directors. The atmosphere of the City Center was great, and a board member encouraged me before the final round, saying, "you were really good during the previous rounds, so keep on track, don't be afraid of falling and enjoy!" Also, I made friends with students from other countries during the long course of the final. I keep in touch with them after coming back to Japan. It is so uplifting to share information and exchange recent news on the internet.



Asuka Tsuchida as Esmeralda. Photo: E. Kauldhar/Dance Europe

The final took place immediately after the disastrous earthquake and tsunami in Japan.

There was lots of news coverage about our national disaster, and people spoke to me warmly, with sympathy and compassion for my country, not only in the City Center but also on the street and at the hotel. It was such a touching experience, that I was convinced that so long as I was lucky enough to be dancing here, I had to do my best. My achievement would not only be for myself, but also for those who could not come to New York from the affected areas.

How did you feel when your name was announced as the laureate of the Dance Europe Outstanding Artistry Award?

I had been already feeling as if walking in the air when I was chosen as one of the Top 12, so I could not believe that the magazine chose me!

How successful were you at the Job Fair attached to the YAGP?

It was a massive event, and unfortunately not all applicants were given opportunities to dance due to the limited space. I was lucky enough to start in one of the two groups that were accommodated in a large studio, and I proceeded to the centre with soft shoes, then with pointe, and finished with contemporary dancing. I was offered a contract with the Studio Company of the Washington Ballet and a scholarship with the New Zealand Ballet School, which may lead me to an apprenticeship with the main company after one month's training. I am not sure whether it was my performance at the competition proper or at the Job Fair that counted, but I am going to New Zealand in June and to Washington D.C. in September!