Berks Ballet Theatre Conservatory dancers stretch limits

By Susan L. Pena - Reading Eagle correspondent  Thursday February 25, 2016 12:01 AM

READING, PA — Ballet is arguably the most physically demanding art form one can pursue. The hours of class, the constant risk of injury, the endless rehearsals for performances are all part of a dance student's daily life.

Add to that the psychological stress of competition, and you're stretching a ballet dancer's endurance to the limit.

That is what five students from Berks Ballet Theatre Conservatory of Dance experienced recently when they entered the Youth America Grand Prix Regional, or YAGP, semifinals held Feb. 5 through 7 at Upper St. Clair High School in Allegheny County.

YAGP is the largest international scholarship competition for...
YAGP is the largest international scholarship competition for dance students ages 9 to 19. Semifinals are held annually in 17 U.S. cities and all over the world; the finals are held in New York City in the spring.

Nathan Bland, owner and director of the conservatory since 2013, said he started taking select students to the YAGP semifinals the year he took over.

"I thought it would be a new opportunity for the dancers to expand their horizons and push their technique beyond what it is," Bland said during a group interview at the BBT studio in the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts with the students who attended this year. "It's a different experience from taking class here and performing onstage."

"With the company (all the dancers are members of BBT), they get a lot of opportunities to perform, but it's a little more comfortable. They're used to the theater and the other dancers and the audience. This pushes them out of their comfort zone."

The first year, he took two students - Olivia Moyer, then 13, and former BBT member Katina Johns, then 17 - to the semifinals in Philadelphia.

Moyer, now 16, has participated all four years.

"You have to train far in advance," Moyer said, "so you're prepared to go onstage. You're really nervous beforehand, but once you're backstage you're with everybody else and you're talking, and you don't realize it's your turn - and then, you just kind of go."

Bland said Moyer "thrives on competition, so it's a good atmosphere for her. Each time she has gone, she has raised the bar."

Moyer said she thought her performance this year was one of her strongest, "a personal best."

She and Audra Nemirou, 15 (who also competed last year), entered in the senior division, for dancers 14 and over. Each of them performed two classical variations (solo from the standard repertoire) and a contemporary solo (in this case, choreographed by Bland).

Moyer performed the Kitri Variations from Act 1 of "Don Quixote" and Diana's variation from the "Diana and Actaeon Pas de Deux."

Nemirou performed Odette from "Swan Lake" and Gamzatti from "La Bayadere."

"It's really fun to get another opportunity to perform and do another character," said Nemrour, who has performed the role of the Snow Queen in BBT's last two "Nutcrackers." "It's cool to meet new people."

Moyer, who recently performed as the Sugarplum Fairy in BBT's...
Moyer, who recently performed as the Sugarplum Fairy in BBT's Nutcracker," agreed that the opportunity to meet other dancers and make new friends is a bonus. Both Moyer and Nemirw attended Exeter High School.

Three dancers from BBT's junior corps competed in the YAGP for the first time this year, in the junior division. They were all excited about the experience, and plan to go next year.

Anna Romaniski, 13, a Gov. Mifflin student, said: "It was fun. It was scary. There were so many really good people going before me, and I thought I couldn't do that. It was probably the most nerve-wracking thing I've ever done."

Member Warchol, 13, a student at Exeter Junior High School, geared: "I was nervous, but I had a lot of fun."

Rethen Kimmel, 12, an Oley Valley student, said she danced the bird from "Sleeping Beauty"; Romaniski danced the Kitri Variations from Act 3 of "Don Quixote"; and Warchol danced "Harlequinade" variations.

All the girls recounted with shudders seeing competitors showing off with flashy pirouettes; they had to steel themselves not to let it shake their confidence.

Kimmel said that while none of the five placed, they all danced beautifully, and were "on a par with the competition."

"It's not about placing," he said. "It's about the personal experience. Even if you don't thrive on competition, it's a good atmosphere, because the world is full of competition. This is reality."

"The benefit is the extra training through the year to go beyond where they would normally go, and then going to the competition. It's good for preparing for life."

In order to prepare for the competition, Bland said, each student starts the May before, working with him privately for two hours a week.

"It's a big commitment," he said, "on top of the commitment of being in the company and the conservatory classes and school."

Kimmel, who was trained and passed exams in the Cecchetti Method, has also trained with Balanchine-style dancers. (The standards of the Cecchetti Method, a rigorous method developed by the Italian ballet master Enrico Cecchetti, are maintained by the Cecchetti Council of America.)
He said what is taught at the conservatory is a blend of these and other styles. In preparing students for competition, he emphasizes clean technique and nuances in the performance of each variation, a process that takes a lot of time.

Everyone agreed that performing alone onstage in front of judges is very different and more demanding than performing in a company ballet for a local audience.

It's a test, not only of endurance and artistry, but courage.

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