

Bolshoi beckons U.S. youth

Dancers will audition here and elsewhere for 15 slots in the august company's summer training program.

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Dancers who auditioned last year for the summer program at the Bolshoi Ballet Academy.

For decades, the Bolshoi Ballet was synonymous with beauty and mystery. Some of the world's best dancers trained and performed there, and its audiences knew and loved ballet like few others. And though Mr. Gorbachev tore down that wall more than 20 years ago, the Bolshoi has remained an almost entirely Russian institution - until this year, when David Hallberg, already an American Ballet Theatre principal dancer, surprised

everyone by joining the Bolshoi as well.

On Sunday, ballet students between the ages of 9 and 22 will have a rare chance to audition at the Philadelphia Ballet School for a Bolshoi Ballet Academy summer program. Only 15 will be chosen at 16 sites nationwide, all 15 or older. A larger group, including younger students, may be selected for Bolshoi programs in New York and Connecticut.

The three-year-old Russian program is unusual, said Rina Kirschner, vice president of the Russian American Foundation, which sponsors it, because students don't just study ballet but are immersed in Russian culture.

"From the beginning, we've had one very important aspect to the program," Kirschner said, "to create a whole cultural dialogue, including Russian culture, language, and history."

The 15 dancers get a three-week Russian-language immersion course in New York, then head to Moscow, where they will devote mornings to ballet, afternoons to language classes, and evenings to Bolshoi and other performances. They will live at the academy during the week and with host families on weekends.

Two of the 15 will be chosen for two more weeks of study and a performance with their Russian classmates. Several will be offered scholarships to study year-round at the Bolshoi. Kirschner said 30 to 40 percent of the program's alumni have continued there.

Including, perhaps, the next Natalia Osipova, Alexei Ratmansky - or David Hallberg.

For information, and to preregister for auditions, go to <http://bolshoiballetacademy.com/auditions.htm>.

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