

YoungArts alumni return to inspire new generations of artists

- Graduates of Miami's annual YoungArts Week return to teach
 - Top actors, dancers and musicians aim to inspire their teenage counterparts
 - Program has fostered generations of top U.S. artistic talent for 35 years
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Sarah Lamb is a renowned leading dancer with England's Royal Ballet, but at 17, she was so petrified with stage fright she almost ran out on a major competition.

Michael McElroy is a successful Broadway actor and singer, but as a teen from Cleveland suburb, he thought he'd never rival the cool arts kids from New York.

Acclaimed pianist Elizabeth Roe is forging new paths for classical music with provocative videos that go viral on Youtube, something she never imagined as a young prodigy.

Each of them got a life-changing boost as teenagers at [YoungArts Week](#), the just-concluded annual program that brings approximately 170 adolescent artists in dance, theater, music, visual art, literature, film and design to Miami for a creative boot camp in early January. Among their teachers were Lamb, McElroy, Roe and other YoungArts

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alumni, who brought their own experience with the program to the students who are a younger version of themselves.

For kids who don't hail from big cities or prestigious art schools, who don't have peers against whom they can measure their ability or share their passion for Mozart or Sondheim, being selected from the thousands who apply to the program is an enormous confidence booster.

"It was the first time someone outside of Shaker Heights recognized I had something worth celebrating," [McElroy](#), a teacher at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts whose Broadway resume includes the shows *RENT*, *Big River*, and *Next to Normal*, says of his stint at YoungArts in 1984. "It was a turning point for me — it made me think I could do this."

That sense of recognition goes deeper than simple self-esteem, says actor [Zuzanna Szadkowski](#), 37, who has had regular roles on CW's *Gossip Girl* and HBO's *Girls* and, like McElroy, was an awed Midwestern teen when she came to YoungArts in 1997.

"The first day they had a lunch and they referred to us as artists," says Szadkowski, who teaches a master class on Friday. "It was the first time anyone had called me an artist, and all of a sudden I saw a future."

These teachers don't focus on the competition-driven ethos that dominates so much of arts training. As McElroy points out, making it to Miami means these kids are already winners. Instead, he and his compatriots emphasize the possibilities beyond technical achievement.

"They've already shown they're talented," he says. "We're going to challenge you to try a different way, to take risks and not think so much about the result, but open your mind to possibilities. We're not as interested in can they execute, but are they fearless about making a fool of themselves, then get up again and keep trying."

There were plenty of challenges for the 22 dance finalists in Lamb's master class at Miami City Ballet's studios on Monday. Only four are ballet dancers, and for some, such as the classical Indian and tap dancers, even basic steps are foreign. But Lamb, who with her immaculate form and ribbon-like flexibility looks a [quintessential ballerina](#), encourages each one to take a place up front, emphasizing broad movement qualities rather than technical specifics.

"Eat the space!" she urges during a waltz combination, lunging and exhorting them as they move across the studio. "Grow the whole thing — the ending is the beginning of the next part. It's continuous." At the end of the class she lines the kids up so she can hug each one.

Although [Lamb](#), a finalist in 1998, was also a [Presidential Scholar in the Arts](#) (an honor awarded to select YoungArts finalists) and joined the Boston Ballet that same year, she says she was intimidated by her cohorts. Waiting in the wings at the International Ballet Competition in Jackson, Mississippi, as she was also in the midst of the Presidential Scholar process, she was tempted to flee right before her entrance.

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"I was this far from the exit door and I thought, 'I could just run out right now,' " she says.

But she has turned that sense of insecurity into an asset, which she explained in response to student Javon Jones' question during a pre-class talk.

"That's such an interesting question, because vulnerability can have a negative connotation where you don't have confidence, or you're lacking the wherewithal to overcome your fears," she says. "But there's a vulnerability where the audience can identify with the artist. To me the most interesting artists are those who display humility, who say this is what I believe, come with me and let me make you believe this — not just show you what I can do."

Jones, 17, a modern dancer from Detroit, was inspired by Lamb's sincerity.

"To me, vulnerability is a big thing in dance," he says. "She was very connected and open with us. As I get older I hope to obtain status. She shows that when you get to that status it's more effective to be human."

Roe, 34, was already an [accomplished pianist](#) who had been touring for several years when she joined YoungArts in 2000. But as she talked to a group of aspiring classical musicians at New World Symphony on Tuesday, she emphasized the importance of passion, of collaboration and trying new things, like the [creative videos](#) Roe makes with piano duo partner Greg Anderson that have helped make her kind of a rock star in the classical music world.

"Seize opportunities and open yourself up to something that might intimidate you," she tells them. "Don't be afraid to change your path."

Afterwards Roe says that young musicians need to be original. "The conservatories are so saturated with talent, you almost have to take an unconventional path to have a career," she says. "I want to give them reassurance that they have the tools to channel their talent in ways that are meaningful to them personally."

As she coaches pianists Adrian Liao and Hana Mizuta, both 17, on a Mozart sonata that is one of her and Anderson's [most popular videos](#), she talks of release and yearning, of connecting to the audience on a human level. Afterwards Mizuta, already a fan, is wide-eyed with excitement.

"I have a lot of musicians around me at home," Mizuta said. "Sometimes you get really bogged down in details. I really like how she talked about connecting music and other disciplines. It's opening up your eyes to being able to see music from a different perspective."

While YoungArts alumni have long played a role as teachers and adjudicators on the panels that select the winners, in recent years the foundation has focused on bringing more of its graduates back to the fold as instructors, as well as in other ways. It's part of figuring out how to best use the plaza and the galleries and other spaces, including Ted's, a small club, on its Miami [campus](#) near downtown.

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Playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney, a 1999 finalist, staged an innovative version of [Romeo and Juliet](#) on the plaza last spring for the group's Outside the Box series, and jazz musician and MacArthur "Genius" Award winner Jason Moran, another alum, will collaborate with skateboarders for an [outdoor show](#) on Feb. 6. Last fall artist Daniel Arsham, another former finalist, had an [exhibit](#) in the YoungArts gallery; while choreographer Desmond Richardson, one of YoungArts' earliest graduates, was a resident artist. In March, Jacomo Bairos, a 1994 music finalist, will lead his classical fusion Nu Deco Ensemble in a [concert at Ted's](#).

"We figured that, now that we have more space, let's put more focus on putting the family back together," says Lisa Leone, vice president of artistic programs. In the future, they hope to expand that effort with projects like bringing together younger and established alumni for collaborations, she says.

In a way, this is an extension of the bond that YoungArts finalists make during their week here. Most alumni say the friendships and professional connections they make in Miami can last for years. Szadkowski, for instance, met her college roommate and her best friend, both also from the Midwest, at YoungArts. She began returning as an advisor while she was still in college and has been a master teacher several times.

"I feel continually supported by them," Szadkowski says. "Every time I touch the program I get a jolt of inspiration again, and I remember what a rare gift it is to be an artist. And hey — I am one! They said I was! So I want to be a part of that."

IF YOU GO

What: YoungArts Week classical music performance

When: 8:30 p.m. Thursday

Where: New World Symphony New World Center, 500 17th St., Miami Beach

Info: \$15 at youngarts.org/yaw or nws.edu

What: YoungArts Writers' Readings and Visual Art, Photography and Design Exhibit

When: 6 - 7:15 p.m. Readings, 7:30 - 9 p.m. Exhibit, Friday

Where: YoungArts Campus, 2100 Biscayne Blvd., Miami

Info: Free, RSVP at youngarts.org/yaw

What: YoungArts Backyard Bash, with DJ, dessert, and open bar

When: 10 p.m. Saturday

Where: YoungArts Campus

Info: \$143.42 at youngarts.org/yaw



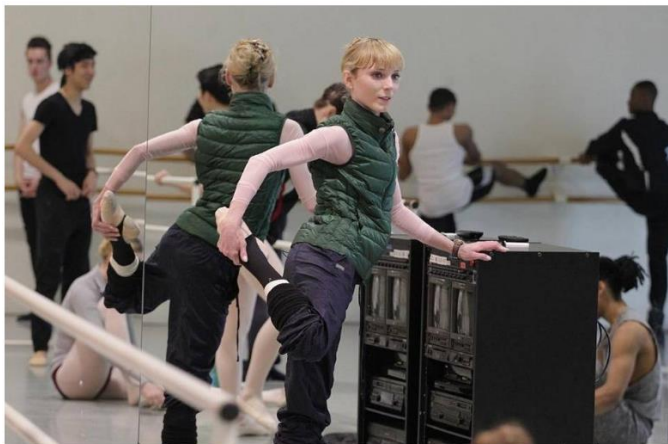
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