Toronto-born young dancer wins international ballet competition

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Shale Wagman (Gregory Batardon photo

Shale Wagman is living every ballet dancer's dream. The Toronto-born 17 year old won the 46th Annual Prix de Lausanne International Ballet Competition in Switzerland on Feb. 4.

The competition is for young dancers who are seeking to pursue a professional career in classical ballet. Some 74 candidates aged 14 to 19 competed in the prestigious event. Twenty-one dancers were selected to move on to the finals. Wagman earned a gold medal and an artistic prize. He also gets to choose an apprenticeship from a list of world-renowned ballet companies.

"Winning is quite surreal and a dream come true. I've worked very hard. Dance is not a motivation for me, it's my duty, it is what I have to do in this world. It's like my air, so I do everything possible to be the best that I can be. People told me how moved they were after my performance and I realized how much power I have to move people, so that really was my greatest achievement," Wagman told *The CJN*.

After being a finalist on *Canada's Got Talent* when he was 12, Wagman decided to focus on becoming a classical ballet dancer.

"I live for dance. I had been studying contemporary, jazz, tap, modern, acro, hip hop, lyrical – but not classical ballet. I had to change the way I danced, to learn classical ballet. It's very strenuous and extremely difficult. No dance style would exist without ballet," explained Wagman.

Wagman then competed at the Youth America Grand Prix International Competition, performed at the Lincoln Centre for the Performing Arts in New York City and ultimately received scholarships to train around the world. At age 14, he went to Monaco to attend the Princess Grace Academy, where he is now in his senior year.

"You have to live for your art. You have to have the right physique, train multiple hours a day, train abroad and you can't be with your family. You have to constantly be searching and striving for this perfection. That can make you crazy," said Wagman.

A typical day for the young dancer begins at 6:30 a.m., with breakfast and a 15-minute walk in the gardens, followed by a warm-up at 7:00 a.m. Classes begin at 8 a.m. and conclude at 8 p.m. He is in bed by curfew at 10 p.m. All his meals are prepared by a nutritionist.

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Wagman burns thousands of calories training some six hours a day.

"Just standing in first position – when both of your feet are turned out to the side – you have to use so many muscles and so much power and you have to have so much precision from the moment you stand. As a ballet dancer, you shape your physique, meaning you have to work with the right muscles to be able to form nice lines and nice muscle tone, so you can show better aesthetics on stage. You work on turns, jumps, placement and extension," said Wagman.

There are also risks involved. Two years ago, he suffered a stress fracture in his back.

"I was off for six months. My back was very flexible and I was in the middle of a big growth spurt. Mentally, that was extremely difficult for me because I didn't have dance to lean on – not being able to dance and not do the thing I love doing the most. But everything happens for a reason. When I got out of it, I came back a better dancer and I learned a lot from my injuries. I learned how to work with my body better," he said.

Wagman is grateful for his family and their continued support, as well as the support of his 25,500 followers on social media.

"My mom and I are best friends. Both of my parents have instilled in me to always believe in myself. I am so grateful for them everyday. I believe I am being guided in my life (by God) and it really helps me to stay grounded and know that I have a purpose: to dance and spread my passion and that comes from being Jewish," said Wagman.

Next year, he plans to attend the English National Ballet Company in London.