

Navigating the Professional Ballet Audition: The dancer's perspective



Tammy Higgins from South Africa found her way to the HNBC

If you ask dance administrators, the answer to finding your way to the professional world of ballet is a matter of understanding the requisite preparation and possessing excellent physical facility. With those assets in hand, a dancer has to also successfully map an audition strategy from institution to institution, city to city. Preparation for the big moment is one thing. Mapping your way to numerous auditions trying to find the right environment and the best match is quite another. Paying for all of that travel that may or may not bear fruit is the bane of a dancer's life and prevents a lot of dancers from finding their right niche.

This category of advanced pre-professional dancer has grown beyond the advisements as to how to wear the right leotard and fix their hair. They well understand the importance of being on time. What this dancer category begs is the opportunity to grab the attention of the right decision maker and make that impression their best.

From the dancer's point of view, a lot of precious time and money is spent on trying to find the right company while in the dark. "We are always looking for our mentors and spending a lot of time online trying to figure out the next best thing without wasting our precious resources" remembers Hungarian National Ballet Company's Tammy Higgins who travelled to Hungary from South Africa. "The advice seems to be there but somehow it doesn't focus well or reconcile with the reality of the situation. There is always the element of luck, of course, but finding the right match means keeping a vigilant eye out for opportunities". Clearly, the proactive and resilient dancer is often the dancer who finds his or her way into the right company.

Tammy Higgins found her way to the 125 year old Hungarian National Ballet Company through their newly established exposure on MySpace. "As soon as they

opened their doors to the world, foreigners like me were there on their doorstep". Along with other motivated dancers, Higgins was hired. She has been happily situated ever since dancing the classical repertoire she has always dreamed of.

Every company is swamped with requests for auditions in company class. It is not only difficult to arrange given the schedules of decision makers, it is not cost effective. This fact escapes most hopefuls. Companies simply refuse requests without the courtesy of a response or by posting it on their websites. It is not because the administrators or Artistic Directors are without desire to find talent, but because of the simple overload of demands on their time.

"We were frustrated by the talent that might have gone under the radar just because of the difficulties in accommodating schedules" explains Gabriella Komor, International Cultural Manager for the 110 member HNBC. "We are always looking for new talent" agrees Artistic Director Gábor Keveházi "but vetting the requests is burdensome and time consuming".

In 2009, dancers like Tammy Higgins came from all over the world as soon as the invitation for their summer international course and audition went out from the Hungarian National Ballet Company. Annually, the HNBC has developed a program for dancers and directors in a win-win cost effective program. The HNBC faculty takes applications online and quickly vets the applicants to ensure a high quality program for international pre-professionals and professionals trying their chances with European companies. A three week preparation in classic ballet repertory, contemporary and character in the Opera House manifests in a showcase audition doubling as a public performance in the famous Hungarian State Opera House. Last year's sell out performance, awards and contracts were a testament to the successful formula.

For some, the course and performance was a once in a lifetime chance to examine their professional chances. Some participants won competition awards while others came away with professional contracts. In addition, this year's event will award internships and apprenticeships to those dancers not yet poised for full contracts. In any case, every dancer comes away with a coaching and performance experience that is unique to the HNBC-SI program.

Dancers are always searching for the reasons they weren't the ones hired or selected for the PD program or received the apprenticeship. The reasons for speculations are as long as your arm. "Sometimes", according to Ildikó Pongor, Hungarian Ballet Master and international star, " it is just a matter of what a Director is looking for in any given time... sometimes, it's a lack of performance ability or the dancer is just overweight and needs some guidance. Sometimes, I am afraid, the dancer doesn't have the right match in personality. The reasons for a non-hire are numerous. We want to help bring some real light to this mystery....".

The one thing the participants can count on in the HNBC-SI is a direct approach from vested faculty who become close advocates on behalf of their charges next big step. "It was an amazing opportunity to demonstrate our range, to be coached with such detail and to be amongst an international community of dancers" says last year's winner of the HNBC contract, Tatiana Vdovicheva of Russia.

For more information about the 2010 Hungarian National Ballet Company's Summer International program, please go to www.opera.hu/hnbcsi.