

Ailey students learn to sing for Broadway auditions



Giving Dancers Their Growl

The Ailey School and The Lion King team up to teach the art of the Broadway audition.

BY JEN PETERS

Dance students are trained to speak with their bodies, not their voices. But a professional dance career often requires more than physical expertise. To land a dream job on Broadway, dancers are asked to speak, and worse yet, sing during an audition. By themselves. In front of people.

Aubrey Lynch II, associate producer of *The Lion King*, says, "Dancers come to auditions with the training written on their bodies, but they haven't worked on the other parts of performance craft." A former Ailey company member and original cast member of *TLK*, Lynch created an annual workshop two years ago for pre-professional Ailey students to teach the ins and outs of Broadway auditions. (Alvin Ailey himself performed on Broadway in *House of Flowers*—see "In the Beginning," p. 34).

Top-level students are invited to participate but are not told what to expect. "They have to stumble through, just like a real audition," explains Lynch. The workshop is divided into four four-hour sessions that tackle a different aspect of the audition process, culminating with a final "call-back" on the last day. Each session simulates an audition, except the teachers give feedback along the way, explaining when cuts would be made and why some people would advance.

The first day is a dance call, run by *Lion King* associate dance supervisor Celise Hicks, who teaches combinations of choreography from the show. "The audition starts as soon as you walk through the door," Lynch says. Because dancing is the students' strong suit, the workshop focuses not on technique, but on the logic of auditions.

Photo: Denise Murphy; Courtesy: Ailey School

Ailey/Fordham graduate Maresa D'Amore-Morrison says, "I was so nervous and tense, and it wasn't even a real audition! Now I know how to be calm, block everyone else out, take in the choreography and immediately perform." Inside information is revealed: Even if a dancer is cut from an audition, they might be put on a call list for a specific track or role. These dancers might be called back in the future if a performer leaves a show.

Day two takes a turn into the uncharted territory of a vocal call—Singing 101 with former *TLK* music director David Kreppel. Students sing in harmony on the song "We Dance." Kreppel provides basic tips, like enunciating the lyrics, projecting the voice, and using breath efficiently. "Who will my love be? Have you ever asked that before?" exclaims Kreppel, urging the

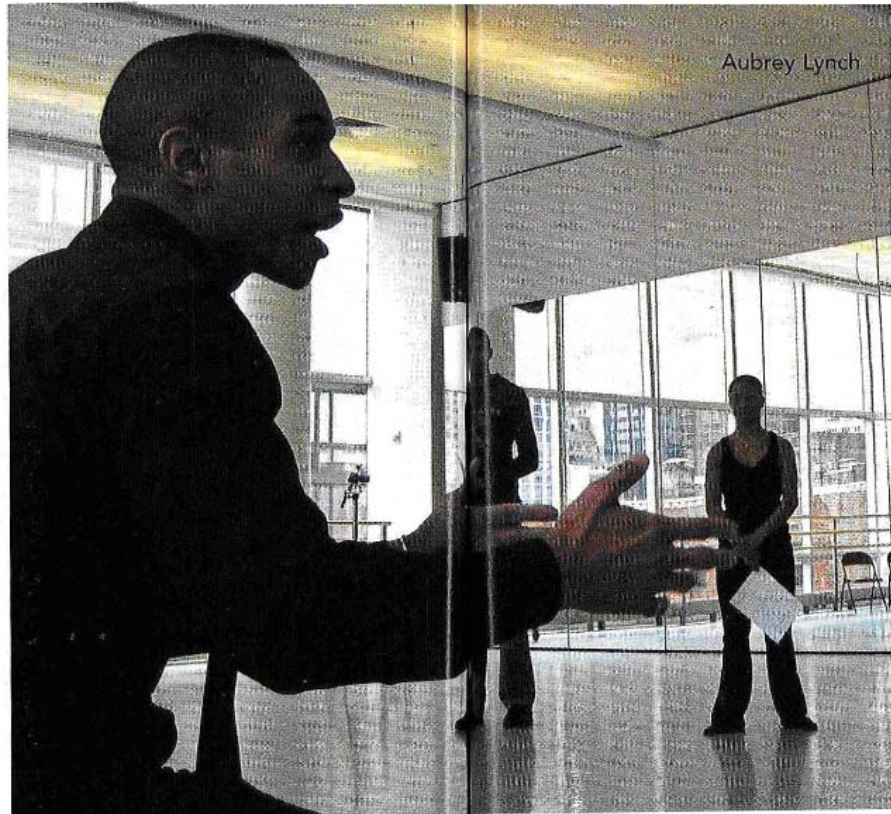
"Don't let your body deny that you are a dancer during singing auditions."

— David Kreppel

dancers to dig deep into the lyrics rather than read the surface.

Kreppel asks students to look at each other while singing, using their faces and bodies to tell the story. "Don't let your body deny that you are a dancer during singing auditions." As the session ends, the dancers continue singing into the hallway: The workshop clearly builds confidence. "I want to do it all—acting, singing, dancing, choreographing," says another recent Fordham grad, Ezra Ezzard. "The workshop was refreshing. It helped me bridge the gap from student to professional."

During the acting/scene-work session, the dancers read from a cop-turned-attorney monologue. *TLK* resident director Jen Bender coaches them on volume control, spatial relationships, finding focal points, and being engaged when not speaking. "Directors will give you instructions just to see if you can take directions," says Bender. If performers can't adapt to directions, they'll appear difficult to work with and probably won't make the cut.



Bender chooses two students to read for Simba and Nala, delving into scene phrasing and body movements. Similar to phrasing choreography, she asks the students to think about the ups and downs of the scene, to identify the climax and let it grow. She tells them to let their body move naturally and stand strong without nervous movements or swaying. She also emphasizes saying the lines exactly as written—every single word.

The final session is a presentation for a panel of Broadway casting directors, dancers, and Ailey School teachers. The 25 dancers split into groups to demonstrate the skills they've learned. The teachers give new instructions like changing the spacing or intent to see how the dancers adapt. "Auditioning means learning to be comfortable being uncomfortable," says Lynch. He points out clothing choices, saying that a casting director should be able to visualize a dancer in the part. But above all, he says a performer needs to fill the lines, lyrics, and movements with meaning from the heart, whether in musicals or on concert dance stages.

While the workshop is designed to open doors, it is not a talent recruiting program for Disney on Broadway.

Lynch says they do not hire students based on their workshop performance. But when Ezzard began his auditioning journey this summer both for concert dance and Broadway shows, he felt a step above the competition because these casting directors have seen him and worked with him.

Now a member of Urban Bush Women's second company, Morrison continues to use performance tips she picked up during the workshop, and keeps the future Broadway dream open.

Michelle Brugal, a current cast member of *TLK*, attended the first *TLK* workshop in 2006, and she joined the national *Aida* tour upon graduation from Fordham. The next year she hit the road with *The Lion King* national tour, and when the dancer performing her role on Broadway left the show last December, Brugal auditioned and got the job. "The workshop helped with auditioning in general, from what to wear, to what to sing, to how to sell yourself," explains Brugal. "And it definitely helped me get the Broadway job!"

Jen Peters, an Ailey/Fordham graduate, lives in NYC and dances with Jennifer Muller/The Works.