

my big break

By Ashley Rivers

SEVEN DANCERS DISH ON THE ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME OPPORTUNITIES THAT TOOK THEM TO THE TOP.

Imagine this: You're an understudy in a great new musical at a regional theater. It's just days after opening night—and the leading lady is suddenly sick. You're prepared to go on, of course, and you step in to rock the show. A few days later, the director calls and asks you to take over the role permanently.

Soon the show moves to Broadway, with you as its star. That year you win the Tony Award for Best Actress in a Musical and the Fred Astaire Award for Best Dancer on Broadway. Just like that, you've rocketed from relative unknown to Broadway superstar.

Sounds like a dream, right? Well, that's just what happened to Sutton Foster after she joined the cast of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* in 2000. Some dancers may seem to gain stardom overnight. But in reality, persistence and determination led to a steady series of dance jobs before that big moment came. No matter the path, many dancers experience a breakthrough moment that paves the way for a successful career. Read on to hear from seven dancers about their big breaks.



Hope Boykin
of Alvin Ailey
American
Dance Theater

hope boykin

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

After graduating from The Ailey School, I auditioned for the company four or five times before I was hired. I wouldn't say I was discouraged, but I did really want the job. I just wasn't as mentally and physically prepared as I should have been to go into the audition and say, "There's no one else, I'm the one you have to choose."

About a week after one of the auditions, Judith Jamison, AAADT's artistic director,

called me and said, "Hope, I love you and love your dancing, but there are some things I would like you to work on. I wanted to let you know this personally before you were hired." My knees were shaking. She hired me, but she wanted me to focus on how I carried myself onstage.

Over the past 11 seasons with the company, Ms. Jamison has allowed me to grow within the organization. She chose me to choreograph for the company's 50th anniversary, and I went to Africa with her for a special project.

maria kochetkova

Principal, San Francisco Ballet

The first major turning point in my life was competing at the Prix de Lausanne when I was 18. I was in my last year at the Bolshoi Ballet Academy in Moscow, and they didn't allow dancers to go to competitions like they do now. I felt it was important for me to do



Maria Kochetkova
of San Francisco
Ballet in Swan Lake



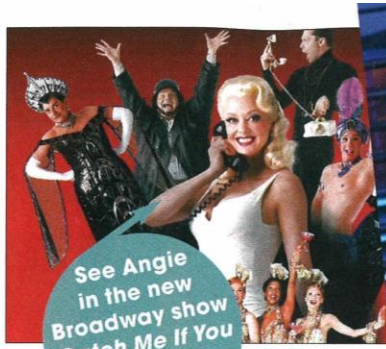
(Here) JaQuel Knight and (below) with Beyoncé at the wrap of the "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" music video

something new, so I prepared secretly in the evenings. At the competition, I won an apprenticeship at the Royal Ballet in London—which meant leaving Moscow for the first time.

JaQuel Knight

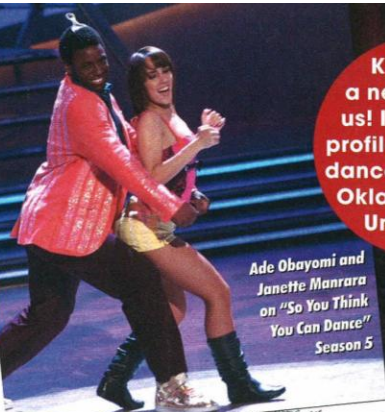
Commercial Dance Choreographer

I got hired to choreograph the "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" video for Beyoncé after Frank Gatson saw me freestyle at a Michelle Williams audition. I was only 19 at the time! A few months later, Frank called me and said, "Hey, I have this new Beyoncé song, and I think you would be great for it. Can you fly out tonight?" The "Single Ladies" video was my first choreography job in L.A. I had my own dance crew back home in



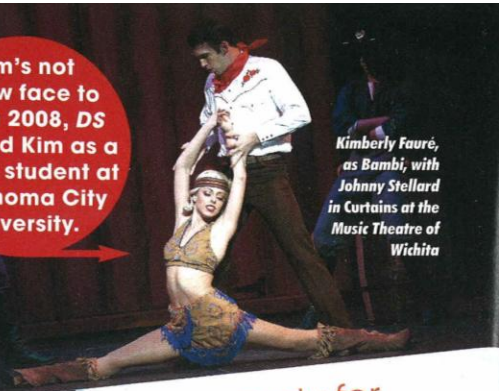
See Angie in the new Broadway show *Catch Me If You Can*, opening this month!

(Above) Angie Schworer as Ulla in *The Producers*; (below, right) Jason Samuels Smith (left) performing on "Sesame Street"



Ade Obayomi and Janette Manrara on "So You Think You Can Dance" Season 5

Kim's not a new face to us! In 2008, DS profiled Kim as a dance student at Oklahoma City University.



Kimberly Fauré, as Bambi, with Johnny Stellard in *Curtains* at the Music Theatre of Wichita

Atlanta and I had danced for Janet Jackson and Gnarlz Barkley, but I had never choreographed something like this.

I knew this was going to be a huge moment for me, but I didn't know how it would start my career as a choreographer. It's what I always wanted to do—I just didn't know it would come so soon.

angie schworer
Broadway Veteran

I was in the original cast of *The Producers* and was a second understudy for Ulla, the lead female role. One day Cady Huffman, who originated the part, got sick when the first cover was on vacation. It was a two-show day, and they told me at the end of the matinee that I was going on.

I remember my first entrance: I was so nervous, and I thought, "This is it, step it up." I popped through the door, and Matthew Broderick and Nathan Lane's faces were so smiley. I was shaking but somehow I just kind of relaxed. I did several shows as Ulla and then went back to the ensemble.

Later, Susan Stroman, director and choreographer of *The Producers*, invited me to a small rehearsal/audition and asked me to play Ulla on *The Producers'* first national tour. After the tour, I got to come back and play the role for four years on Broadway.

janette manrara
Burn the Floor

Before "So You Think You Can Dance" came along, I was going to school studying finance and working full time at a bank. Dancing was just a hobby of mine. Being on the show was definitely my big break. Because of my presence on TV, I was cast on "Glee" and got to dance at the Academy Awards, which "SYTYCD" judge Adam Shankman



and former contestant Travis Wall were choreographing. Now I'm touring with the Broadway show *Burn the Floor*. None of that would have happened without "SYTYCD."

jason samuels smith
Tap Dancer

The first significant point in my dancer career was dancing on "Sesame Street" with Savion Glover when I was just 8 years old. It gave me a taste of what I could expect from being a professional tap dancer in the entertainment industry. From there, I joined *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* on Broadway at 15, where I performed in front of Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson.

kimberly fauré
In the Midst of Her Big Break!

After moving to NYC last year, one of the first auditions I went to was for *Anything Goes* on Broadway. After a month of callbacks, I got a call that I had gotten a part—I would be in the ensemble as one of the four angels. When I found out, I bawled my eyes out on the street.

From that audition, Kathleen Marshall invited me to an audition for her show *Bells Are Ringing*, which then led to a part in *Aesop and Company*. I basically got three jobs from that one first audition. It just snowballed. I was definitely in the right place at the right time. **DS**

be ready for your big break

"Never give up. Never think it's too late or that it's not going to happen for you. I was told 'no' many times. If you're dedicated and passionate, it will happen."
—Janette Manrara

"Know what you're good at and what makes you stand out from everyone else. **Be comfortable being you and have fun.** Never forget your personality."
—JaQuel Knight

"We are our biggest critics, and we can discourage ourselves. Anything you want, you can have—**set your own standards.**"
—Hope Boykin

"The things you go through in getting a job and trying to find your place aren't easy, but they're worth it. **All of the hard work in the studio is worth it** when you get to perform."
—Maria Kocheikova

"If musical theater is what you want to do, **start singing and acting in addition to dancing.** Remember, there are a lot of people out there who can do all three."
—Angie Schworer

"**Listen more—talk less.** Being a good student will get you far."
—Jason Samuels Smith

"**Be proficient in many areas.** You could be an incredible ballet dancer, but if you can't sing you could get cut from that round of an audition."
—Kimberly Fauré

Ashley Rivers is a freelance writer and former Dance Spirit intern. She is currently researching tap history through a writing fellowship at Emerson College.

(CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) CHRIS CALLIS; MATHIEU YOUNG/FOX; CHRISTOPHER CLARK; COURTESY DIVINE RHYTHM PRODUCTIONS