

Into the Great Wide Open

Prepare your competition dancers for the possibilities—and pitfalls—of professional life.

BY JEN JONES

The glossy world of competition is known for developing star power in the dancers who inhabit it—and with good reason. After all, the convention floor provides an exciting place where dancers can truly hone and show off their technique, perfect their stage presence and hobnob with industry elite. Many dancers even go on to national finals, where they are treated like celebrities by the competition judges and faculty. But what happens when these dancers leave the cocoon of competition

and pursue *actual* stardom? In some cases, making the transition can be more challenging than one might expect.

Case in point: Peter Stark of Tampa, Florida-based Patel Conservatory cites one former student who'd won the Youth America Grand Prix and swiftly moved on to American Ballet Theatre. "He joined ABT with all these accolades at 16, and now he's 21 and just starting to climb out of the corps," says Stark, who chairs the conservatory's dance department. "You feel like, 'Wow, I'm a superstar and everyone adores me,' and

then he basically had to take a number and get in line before he could move into the kind of soloist numbers he was working on as a teenager. It was a tough five years for him."

"Competition dancers do get discouraged because there is a bit of a waiting game," he says. "Being a star at such a young age, it's hard to match that excitement."

Indeed, shifting the focus from winning a trophy to landing a job can be an involved process for both dancer and teacher.

Dancers at Starpower Nationals in Orlando, Florida

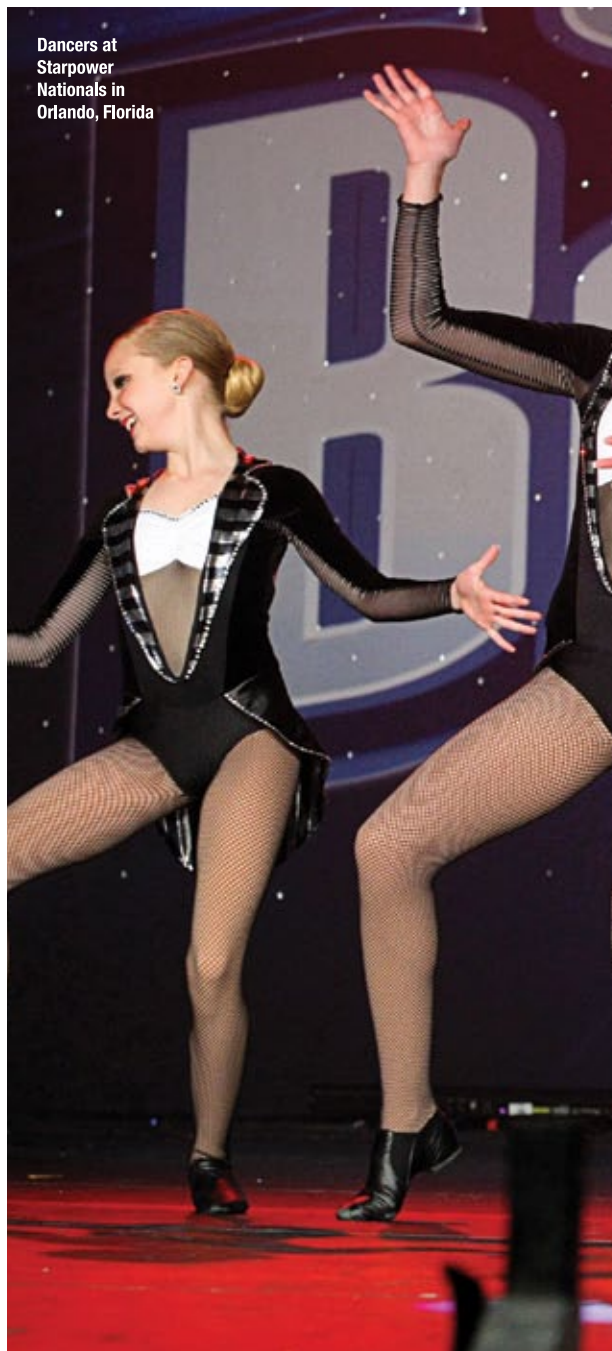


Photo courtesy of Starpower Talent Competition



SET THE STAGE FOR THE FUTURE

One strategy is to introduce the idea of professional dancing early on. At Center Stage in Orem, Utah, co-owner Kim DelGrosso works to secure jobs for dancers at all age levels in tandem with running numerous competitive teams. Her students have appeared on television shows and in industrials. “We start at a very young age preparing them to start thinking about employment,” she says. “Right away, we talk a lot about where their dancing can take them.”

She considers it her responsibility to nurture relationships in the dance industry. She solicits audition breakdowns from major cities to see what casting directors are looking for, and she seeks out face time with top agents to make sure her dancers are seen and considered. “I do my homework on what’s happening on Broadway, in L.A. and Vegas, and on cruise ships,” she says. “I get in [agents’] faces and let them know this is a studio that prepares people for bookings.”

DelGrosso also makes it a point to

seek out a variety of performance opportunities commercially and throughout the community, not just on the competition stage. “I do my best to give my dancers the experience of performing outside the competition venue,” she says. “I want them to experience all kinds of audiences—from intimate to 50,000.”

ENCOURAGE A COMMITMENT TO ARTISTRY

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Complexions Dance Company. “A lot of the time, the gloss they put onto performance is [inspired by] the spirit of competition and being better than the next person; they could miss the point of the actual role or piece they’re auditioning for. In that way, dancers who’ve been trained on the competition circuit often have to dig a little deeper, look a little further.”

Of course, there is no doubt that valuable lessons and insights can also be leveraged from within the competition experience. Rhoden says that the way judges’ feedback is presented and processed can be imperative to future success. “A challenge for young dancers in competition is finding ways to employ the feedback and find growth along their path,” he says. “Once you’re in a company, it’s not about placing third anymore. You do a run-through and get feedback and put it in practice right away. It’s all about knowing how to process the information being given to you and use it in your overall track to becoming better artists.”

RECOGNIZE THERE ARE MULTIPLE WAYS TO WIN

Many competitions offer valuable points of entry into the professional realm. For instance, agent meetings are now commonly awarded, as are company apprenticeships and scholarships to colleges and major studios like New York’s Broadway Dance Center and L.A.’s Millennium Dance Complex. Encouraging students to shoot for these opportunities may be the first step in laying the groundwork for a smooth transition.

For instance, many of Stark’s students attend the Youth America Grand Prix, which he considers a hotbed for networking. “I believe you don’t go to win, but just for the networking and exposure,” says Stark. He had one student who was extremely disappointed to be eliminated just before the finals, but who ended up with an apprenticeship at The National Ballet of Canada.

“This is better!” Stark told him. “That’s what Grand Prix is about—that someone who got eliminated ended up

with an apprenticeship at a major company. You can’t put a price on that.”

DelGrosso employs a similar approach by choosing to attend competitions in Los Angeles that place her students near potential employment. “When I go to L.A. with the kids,” she says, “I try to make appointments and personally walk their headshots and resumés into different agencies. Out of that pile of people I’ve taken to them, at least three or four dancers have really hit it big.” (DelGrosso’s students include

Derek and Julianne Hough and Chelsie Hightower.)

She finds that listing competition achievements on one's dance resumé can sometimes be a detriment. (Think "So You Think You Can Dance" and the distaste judges have occasionally expressed for competition-style dance.) According to DelGrosso, "What [judges] want at a competition can be worthless in this business; [professionals] don't want to hear that you were 'Outstanding Dancer.'"

Though it may sound somewhat harsh, it's important to educate dancers on the realities of the industry and help them take a big-picture perspective on their future. "It all depends on where the award takes you," DelGrosso adds.

ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVES

On the flip side, many elements of competitive dancing can uniquely qualify

dancers for dancing professionally.

"Something competition dancers take away from that world is the ability to be fearless and have a lot of energy," says Lawrence Rhodes, artistic director of dance at The Juilliard School. "That makes them naturally strong. There are many attributes we look for when we audition, and many from the competition world have them because of the work they've done already."

When Rhoden auditions new dancers for Complexions, he is continually impressed by the way competition dancers dive into the opportunity. "One advantage competition dancers have is that they're ready to go," he says. "They're at 150 percent almost immediately—they really know how to turn it on. Their energy is usually high-octane and they're in performance mode right away."

He suggests that teachers can better serve their students by teaching them to

channel that energy into artistry. "It's about asking them to dig deeper and go further than just the steps, the routine, the spacing," he advises. "Justify the steps and make them mean something; teachers have to ask their students to make the steps speak. Remember that dance is language and you are talking to the audience with your body."

It's all about establishing and embracing each student's individuality, whether that is through a competition solo or in the classroom, says Rhoden. "Teachers should empower students to find ways to reinvent themselves on a regular basis," he says. "As a dancer, you're not done, you're never done. The good ones keep exploring and reinventing and going further. As a dancer, your entire life is about realizing the possibilities." **DT**

Jen Jones is based in Los Angeles.

Sending Dancers to College

Dancers who compete at New York City Dance Alliance events win college scholarships as well as trophies.

At July 2011 Nationals in NYC, four colleges awarded scholarships ranging from \$10,000 to a full ride for four years: Marymount Manhattan College, Mercyhurst College, Point Park University and University of the Arts. Executive Director Joe Lanteri then announced the first eight cash scholarships provided through the newly formed New York City Dance Alliance Foundation. By the end of the evening, a total of \$2.8 million had been given to 40 teens.

For more information: www.nycdance.com/NYCDA_Foundation.aspx



▲ Zoey Anderson of Center Stage received \$20,000 to attend the college of her choice. She's now enrolled at Marymount Manhattan College.

◀ Desmond Richardson led a scholarship audition for the New York City Dance Alliance Foundation that awarded \$157,000 during 2011.