



Dave Campbell

by Craig Lanning

PROFILE OF A CHOREOGRAPHER/DIRECTOR

It's 8:30 A.M. and the lights are still dim in many parts of the Bassett Theatre in Downtown Toronto, where just last night "The Top Five" competed again to keep their spots on Canada's highest rated TV show, Canadian Idol.

It will be a rough morning. It's early, everyone is tired, and the judges weren't always kind. Sometimes there are tears, but not today, there's too much to do between now and Results Show time. Right now they are in the studio with Canadian Idol Choreographer Dave Campbell, who has been with the show since its introduction by CTV in 2003. "It's not actually something I ever would have seen myself doing" says Campbell, who although very active as a Theatre Director / Choreographer admits that Television, particularly live, is now the part of his career he enjoys the most. "When I first started to dance I thought I would be happy just to have the opportunity to perform as a backup dancer to incredible people...and I was!" Dancers however, tend to forget that they are so adaptable by nature that other opportunities constantly present themselves. "You've really got to be ready to jump when a project comes along" says Dave who started dancing in Brantford, Ontario. Fortunately one of his teachers was Debbie Noce – a connection which eventually led him to Brian Foley Studios (Now PDA) in Toronto, and The Ryerson Theatre School. "In those days I would take class at Ryerson from 8A.M. to 6 P.M. and then jump on the Subway for another 3 hours of classes at Foley's! I'm not sure where



Dave on the set of Canadian Idol giving direction to Idol hopefuls.

the energy came from but it sure was exciting." In some ways it was the perfect combination, The Foleys were tough but always encouraging, while Theatre School was tough, and not that encouraging.

"It certainly made me realize that you create your own reality, and that you should never let anyone tell you what you can and can't accomplish" His teachers at Ryerson thought he'd make a great Modern teacher. "Anyone who knows me would fall down laughing at the thought" "My weakest dance form was Ballet, so I made it my major, I was already a pretty OK Jazz dancer so I thought, go for a challenge."

Since then Dave has performed for

Mirvish, Disney, Drayton, Aquarius, and countless others in between. He went with the first group of Canadians to Tokyo Disneyland in the 90's, cruised the Caribbean doing huge revues, toured Japan as a Hip Hop Boy for Seiko Matsuda, and has sung in seven Operas. Note to self: Those vocal lessons DO pay off. "At first, it takes a while to find your place in the industry. Friends like to work with friends, and I think anyone can understand that. It can be difficult to find an agent, which makes auditioning for shows rather difficult, but lots of amazing talent comes right out of the dance studio. However, without additional skills like voice training or acting, you may still find yourself waiting on tables. Dancers do

better than most in the performing field as there are many opportunities to perform in Industrial / Fashion / Club shows which gives people a chance to get to know you and recommend you.”

Dave’s advice to the participants in dance competitions is two-fold: “One of the biggest problems a competitive dancer is going to face is ... why am I doing this? There is of course, huge value in competition. Any opportunity to perform allows you to hone your skills, but you also have to learn about your audience. A competition audience is either so supportive that it doesn’t matter what you do, or so judgmental that you adopt an aloof or arrogant performing style. Neither will serve you well once you start performing in a professional environment. Many competitive studios offer excellent training, but beware of the ones that don’t bring in guest teachers to help you broaden your style. Don’t expect the studio to do all the work either. Go to other studios and workshops on your own. Volunteer to perform in community theatre or other outlets where you can work with different choreographers.”

“People often ask me how I got started as a choreographer and director. I’m not sure it was a conscious choice. I’ve always been the first one to offer to put a number together for a fund raiser or even back in Theatre School. It was always fun, and I always ended up learning something. In the beginning, I would choreograph by day, and perform by night. Eventually it got too difficult to juggle both, so something had to go!” Since then, Dave has choreographed a huge variety of productions including: The Gemini Awards (twice) with Sean Cullen, Canada’s Walk of Fame with Trish Stratus, Episodes of Radio Free Roscoe, and the Premiere of Deal or No Deal Canada with Howie Mandel. At last count, Dave has mounted seven live stage shows this season alone. They include two shows at Deerhurst Resort, where he has been resident director for five years, two productions of Cats, one of which toured to the US this summer, Pump Boys and Dinettes, The Buddy Holly Story, and an original golf musical, Scenes from the 19th Hole.

“Of those...I suppose Cats would be the hardest for anyone to audition for” says Dave who remembers auditioning for



Top: Dave with Lionel Ritchie and Debra Byrd.

Right: Dancers from Dave’s production of CATS.



the original Toronto Company again and again. Now that I understand the casting process so much better, my feelings would never be hurt again.”

Cats requires a combination of excellent broad technical dancing with strong vocal ability, and complete comfort on stage as an actor. It also requires you to let go of all your human characteristics and perform the dances as a cat. It alters your movement, it restricts your natural instincts ... it’s exhilarating. It’s also a very specific show in terms of physical presence and character. “Anyone who ever auditions for me for that show should just keep coming back. There’s really a part for almost everyone in it, you just have to hope that yours is available on that production on that day. Auditioning is like waiting for lightning to strike – you just have to be in the right place at the right time, and always be prepared with the right skills.”

Meanwhile, it’s now 6:45 P.M., we’re back at the Bassett Theatre and the atmosphere is entirely different than during those early hours. Screaming fans are lined up along Front Street waiting to get into the live broadcast of tonight’s Idol

results show. Backstage, Dave and vocal coach Debra Byrd are busy giving their final tips to the remaining five competitors before they perform for millions of Canadians. It’s a crazy reality, Kelly Clarkson is waiting in the dark wings, ready to perform a song from her new CD. Two weeks ago it was Enrique Iglesias! Hair and makeup people are working feverishly, and the remaining Idols can’t stop wondering who is not going to be on stage with them next week. “It’s like having kids” says Dave “except that after five years, I’ve had fifty of them! I hate seeing them go, but you have to accept that each week this is part of the show! You see the fear in their eyes, you can only try to talk them down”

The Idol Theme starts, the audience starts screaming madly, everyone in production runs to monitors at the side of the stage. Its just like a dance competition really... the difference being that here you don’t get a second chance.

Check out Dave’s current projects, or contact him at www.davecampbelldirect.com