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PREVIEW

Showcase

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Brantford's Dave Campbell coaches wannabe stars for TV talent shows

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Toronto

It has been a bittersweet summer for Dave Campbell.

Since July, the Brantford-born choreographer has been coaching budding performers on CTV's *Canadian Idol*, shaping their moves for the camera. He has also been teaching the tweens and teens on YTV's *The Next Star* — including hometown girl Christina LeClair.

It's a treat for Campbell — a longtime performer who now directs theatre and choreographs for film and television — to teach young talents, who are eager to learn.

"I like that they are a clean slate. Frequently, they haven't had the opportunity to perform a lot.

"I hear, 'Please tell me what to do. I need someone out there to save my ass,'" he says during an interview backstage at *Canadian Idol* HQ, the John Bassett Theatre inside the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. Now living in Gravenhurst — and wintering in



Dave Campbell praises his *Canadian Idol* colleagues, including vocal coach Debra Byrd. "Byrd and I have a good relationship. I'll do a number and ask Byrd, 'What do you think? What don't you like?'" EXPOSITOR PHOTO / Elizabeth Yates

Miami — Campbell drives into the city once a week or so for work on both shows, staying in Toronto as needed.

"This is my little home. And it's a crazy, exciting place to be."

Lean and agile from decades of dancing, sporting ultra-casual khakis, flipflops, stylishly streaked hair and two hoop earrings, he looks younger than his age — which Campbell won't reveal in print. Looking youthful and hip is a job requirement in an age-driven industry.

But a look at his resume reveals lots of time in the limelight.

Over the past 20 years, he has danced, sung and acted in everything from *Beauty and the Beast* to classic opera. More recently, the triple threat has widened his repertoire to direct theatre and choreograph for TV shows including the Gemini Awards, *Deal or No Deal* and CTV's *Walk of Fame* special.

Five years ago, he joined the *Canadian Idol* crew (which also employs fellow Brantfordian Jen Pratt, a segment producer.)

On Friday nights, Campbell starts working with the Idols on their routines for the coming week. Much of the job involves "backwards planning" — pinpointing moves that look fresh and exciting, but have actually been rehearsed 10 times over.

"A lot of what you do in TV is about moving people around and getting them in excellent angles.

"Our goal is to make things look so incredibly of the moment. And yet it can't be anything like that in reality."

The camera is king in TV land. *Canadian Idol*'s live crowd — 1,000 screaming fans waving gaudy placards proclaiming their faves — is a minor consideration.

"The bulk of the audience is across the country," he says of the show, which draws some two million viewers each week and boasts a whopping 13 cameras on set. "We can afford the kind of production no one else can."

Each singer receives personal treatment from Campbell, whose friendly rapport with the young Idols shows during a photo shoot with *The Expositor*. They happily crowd around for pictures and seem thrilled their mentor is getting some media attention.



Choreographer Dave Campbell (centre) shares a laugh with *Canadian Idol* contestants on set at the John Bassett Theatre in Toronto. With him are Mark Day (left), Sebastian Pigott, Amberly Thiessen, Earl Stevenson and Theo Tams (back row), Drew Wright, Mitch MacDonald and Mookie Morris. EXPOSITOR PHOTO / Elizabeth Yates

"I have to get their trust pretty fast," says the choreographer. "Why should they listen to me?"

"I have to make them believe that I have no other agenda but to make them look good."

Building close relationships with the aspiring stars makes it all the tougher every Tuesday, when one of them gets sent home.

It's a personal blow that evokes the sadness and disappointment of the rejections he has suffered over 23 years in the entertainment biz.

"I empathize with them," says Campbell, who feels a bit fatherly toward his charges.

"You can sing the crap out of a song, but at the end of the day, if they don't like something about you, you don't get the job."

These days, he doesn't hear that too often.

Campbell has been moving up the small-screen ladder since 2002, when he landed a job choreographing "a big, splashy opening number" for comic Sean Cullen, who was hosting the Gemini awards. He was recommended by a friend from Toronto's *Beauty and the Beast* megamusical —

proving that in Canada's relatively small entertainment industry, it pays to be nice.

Loving TV has led Campbell to broaden his skills, with a stint as production assistant on *Project Runway* and, last winter, as assistant director of a live broadcast of *The Nutcracker*. The National Ballet of Canada's Dec. 22 performance was shown at 69 Cineplex theatres across Canada.

The experience was a thrill, says Campbell, who hopes to do it again. And to keep working

television.

"I couldn't see ever getting out of TV: it's just so much fun. As long as I find it this much fun, I can see myself doing it for ages."

Rewind to Brantford Collegiate Institute, where the teen embraced disco and started teaching classes in the craze at a Colborne Street studio. That led to some training in jazz and dreams of becoming a dancer.

But parents Bill Campbell, who ran a sod farm in Lynden, and Dorothy Campbell, a teacher, had other ideas. They encouraged their son to study business at university. He didn't make it through the year.

Ever practical, the Campbells suggested Dave earn teaching credentials in case the whole showbiz thing didn't work out. So he trained at the Ryerson Theatre School, studying forms including ballet, jazz and modern.

After graduating, he taught aerobics and danced at conventions and other venues, earning money and making valuable contacts. For a while, Campbell ran his own dance company providing convention entertainment.

The late 1980s brought a contract at Tokyo Disney and then,

a stint as backup dancer for a Japanese pop star. "It was nuts: we were up there in front of 10,000 people. I never would have experienced that here."

To increase his chances of landing jobs, Campbell honed his own singing chops to become a classically trained bari-tenor. That ability landed him in operas at Theatre Aquarius and Opera Hamilton.

In 1991, *Beauty and the Beast* brought him back to Toronto. "I was a fork and a villager and a bunch of crazy things. I had a ball and probably could have done it forever.

"But the exhaustion of doing eight shows a week and never being home does take it out of you."

It was time to move backstage, developing skills as a choreographer and theatrical director.

Currently in his sixth year as resident director at the Deerhurst Resort in Huntsville, he mounts two shows there each summer. He's produced *Cats* four times for Orillia's Opera House and helmed other cottage-country spectacles including *Kiss Me Kate*, *Jesus Christ, Superstar* and *Forever Plaid*.

The entrepreneur is also expanding his market, having earned his U.S. work visa in 2007. After producing a year-end show for Oakland University in California last year, he's now mounting a musical called *Bombshell* at the Actors' Playhouse in South Beach, Miami — where Campbell and partner Tim Webb, a mural artist, have a winter home.

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Together for 15 years, the couple have been based in Gravenhurst — right on Lake Muskoka — since 2001. It's just under two hours from Campbell's gigs in Toronto and Webb, who is self-employed, can work at home creating large-scale murals for clients including Second Cup, McDonald's and Swiss Chalet. He also designs sets for some of Campbell's productions, including *Cats*.

All in all, it's a sweet life for the Brantford boy whose first job was washing greasy plates at Ponderosa. Ideally, his success will encourage other young hometown hopefuls.

"Everybody comes from somewhere and I wouldn't want people to think they couldn't do something really interesting with their lives.

"You never know what the next day will bring. As long as you're in the moment and out there, there's always something just around the cor-

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