

## A giant leap of faith

Young dancers shimmy onto B'way

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Last Updated: 3:49 AM, July 13, 2013

Posted: 10:37 PM, July 12, 2013

On the third floor of a Midtown hotel last week, the future of Broadway was stretching its legs.

Some 1,500 kids ages 6 to 18 — hailing from Arizona to Wyoming — gathered for the 19th annual New York City Dance Alliance and its audition workshops, where choreographers on shows like “Matilda,” “Annie” and “Newsies” sought their next moppet. Along the way, kids learned how to get a leg up on the competition.

“It’s not a competition,” stresses the group’s founder and director, Joe Lanteri, a veteran choreographer. “We don’t use that word around here. If you come here to win a trophy, this isn’t the place for you — we value [education](#).”



Tennessee’s Matthew Taylor, 17, tries for a leg up on the competition. Zandy Mangold



Kolton Krouse, 17, cleared the first round of auditions for “Newsies,” with help from the New York City Dance Alliance. Zandy Mangold

If you’ve seen Derek Hough of TV’s “Dancing With the Stars” or any of the hoofers of “Billy Elliot” in action, you know how talented some of Lanteri’s [alumni](#) are. And interest is growing: This year’s slate had five workshops to last year’s three.

“There’s more interest in dance now due to the rise in TV’s talent shows,” Lanteri says. “But they are contrived reality.”

So what does reality look like? Sort of like a big game of Twister — girls with frills to the gills and handsome young men splayed across the hallways, stretching [muscles](#) most adults haven’t used for a while, if at all. Here there are no sequins, no diva directors and, mercifully, no “Dance Moms” martinets like Abby Lee, who seemingly abide by the motto, “It’s better to be feared than to be loved.”

Instead, kids scarfed down pizza, talked about “Man of Steel” and helped each other break in new dance shoes — when they weren’t taking workshops with major choreographers, like Tony winner Christopher Gattelli.

Even so, “there’s a lot of pressure,” says Kolton Krouse, 17, of Tempe, Ariz., who was named “Most Outstanding Male Participant” at last year’s workshops. He says he handles the stress by telling himself, before any audition, “I’ve done all I could do.”

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Later that day, he had another chance to prove his mettle — at a “Newsies” audition led by the show’s associate choreographer, Lou Castro.

“We are on the third floor of the Sheraton Hotel in New York City, and you are going up against your worst enemy,” says Castro, as strapping 17-year-olds go toe-to-toe with pipsqueaks, one of whom says, “Sir, I forgot how to land it.”

Castro kneels beside him. “Show us your sole!” (Or was that soul?)

“Don’t be afraid to get down-and-dirty,” Castro continues, “but keep it PG!”

While everyone in the group seems born to dance, some started later than others.

“My mom wanted me to take dance, but I thought they would judge me,” says Matthew Taylor of Franklin, Tenn. Now just 5-foot-5 — he likes to call himself “party-sized” — he started dancing hip-hop at age 10.

“I was so bad, my teachers didn’t know what to do with me,” he confesses. “My moves weren’t ghetto enough.”

Still, Taylor persevered. At his hometown dance studio, where he’s one of only 20 boys — as opposed to 300 girls — he battles ongoing trouble with his knees, due to overactivity. But he won’t quit.

“Dancing stretches my limits of what I think is possible,” he says.

For Eric Debono, 16, of San Francisco, dance is just one of several passions.

“I love music — composing, mixing, singing,” says Debono, a junior at the School of the Arts. He started dancing at age 6 — first jazz, then ballet, and now “everything.”

Not everyone hopes to end up on Broadway.

“Some people want to do TV and movies,” says Krouse. “I want to do everything I can.”

And that may one day include the stage: He, Debono and Taylor have all moved on to the next round of auditions.

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