

# Behind the Scenes of a New York City Open Dance Call Audition

*How does it feel to try to break into musicals? Here's a step-by-step account—and how to survive it*

by Megan Bowen

## **5:45 a.m.– EARLY BIRD GETS THE WORM**

My alarm sounds off at 5:45 a.m., and I roll over in my bed to hit the snooze button on my phone. The sun has not come out of hiding yet, and it takes a little longer for my eyes to adjust to the brightness of the phone in my dark apartment. I immediately open up the Safari app and type AuditionUpdate.com into the search bar. I heard through several dancers taking class at Steps on Broadway the other evening that this website was crucial to finding out “day-of” audition information not previously posted on the audition listing website. That included specific studio locations (if locations had changed), if the casting directors would accept unofficial sign-up sheets before the audition began, how quickly the audition was going, how many girls were already lined up, etc.

As soon as the web page loaded I noticed a new blog discussion column had formed and was titled “*Chicago* –The Musical- Open Dance Call.” Under this column there were several postings about the Chicago Audition, so I began to read. The blog discussion had confirmed that the audition would be at Ripley-Grier Studios at 10 a.m., that the unofficial audition sign-up sheet had been started, and that about seven girls had signed up already. I asked my friend who was going to another audition early that morning to sign me up on this sheet so I could be in the first group of girls to audition.

An Open-Dance Call means only non-Equity dancers are allowed to audition and will be seen by the casting team. Equity is a union for stage professionals who get paid more, have benefits, and get insurance, while non-Equity performers do not. You become Equity when you complete a certain amount of performances and experiences that are logged onto an Equity Card. One weeks’ worth of work equals one Equity point. Once you reach 50 points you become an Equity member. You can also become an Equity member if you get hired straight onto Broadway.

## **8:00 a.m. – DO I LOOK LIKE A DANCER?**

I eventually make it out of my apartment on the corner of 41<sup>st</sup> street and 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue and start walking downtown to 36<sup>th</sup> toward Ripley. It is about my third week of living in New York, in a program the UC Irvine Drama department offers mid-year, and I have already picked up the fast-paced lifestyle as I briskly walk through crowds of people, not even bothering to stop and wait for the pedestrian signal to cross the street.

I find my way to the building where the studios are and go through the spinning doors. In the lobby, I see elevators in the far right back corner but notice people waiting in a line that snakes to the front desk. I join the line behind a tall woman who looks like a dancer—long blond hair, heavy makeup for it being so early, Lulu Lemon pants, a baggy sweater, scarf, Nike tennis shoes,

and a grey backpack. A middle-aged man stands in front of her, grey business suite and a briefcase, no smile. He must be going to another floor of the building to begin his work day.

I get to the front desk and am greeted with a “Can I have your ID” by an older white man wearing a black suit and tie who looks like he is almost at the end of his night shift. He gestures for me to stand back and look into a camera as a photo is taken. He hands me back my ID and tells me “12<sup>th</sup> floor, elevator on the right.” How did he know I was going to the audition? I must fit in with the other women that have already crossed his path this morning. I wonder if the front desk workers can spot a dancer/singer/actor from a mile away. We do give off a certain air.

### **8:30 a.m. – HOLDING ROOM**

The elevator is definitely at its maximum capacity. The 12<sup>th</sup> floor bell dings and five women and I spill out into what seems to be a 70s roller disco style lobby. It has salmon colored walls, pink fluorescent lights, and mini rotating green lasers hanging in the middle of the ceiling that beam in a disco ball style throughout the lobby. Quite the trip.

I follow the other women from my elevator through the lobby and up a flight of stairs that spill out into yet another lobby that is connected to several dance and singing studios. A door to the right of me is propped open and has a paper taped to it that says “CHICAGO OPEN CALL HOLDING ROOM.” I step into the room and find that it is already packed with about 50 dancers who have claimed their space against the wall, mirrors, and center of the room. There is an empty folding table at the back of the room with two papers taped to it—this must be the sign-up. I walk toward the table and glance down at the paper to see that there are already 75 women signed up to audition.

### **9:00 a.m. – WHO ARE YOU?**

I’m sitting in the back left corner of the holding room and go unnoticed by everyone around me. The majority of the women look to be about 19-25 years old. There are a few women who seem to be in their late twenties to early thirties but not any older. This is a lot different than the Equity dance calls I have been to where the age range was more 25-40. There seemed to be all ethnicities and all body types.

Women who know each other give over-dramatic hugs to one another and obnoxious air kisses. The women who don’t know anyone sit by themselves with their headphones in. Dancers doing their own warm up routine in the middle of the room are clearly overly stretching their bodies to show off. Women who are running late flee to the bathrooms to finish curling their hair and applying makeup.

I start talking to a girl sitting next to me named Nicole. She is 20 and in her third year at North Carolina School of the Arts. She had taken a 9-hour bus trip into the city earlier this week and went to several auditions over the weekend, none of which she had gotten called back for. She looks too young to be in the world of *Chicago* so I am interested to see how she does at this audition.

### **9:30 a.m. – HOW DO YOU STAND OUT?**

The audition monitor walks into the room and everyone stops talking. The monitor is in charge of collecting the headshots/resumes and calling girls into the audition room, and is the direct line of contact between the casting/directing team and the dancers. He announces that the

choreographer wants the dancers in heels and that they will be taken in 30 at a time. He collects the first 30 headshots and resumés and directs the women to line up around the audition room, which seems to be right across from the holding room.

Everyone begins to take off their warm up clothing and reveal their audition attire. All the women have dressed in the world of *Chicago*, and by this I mean very sexy and very little clothing. The room becomes a sea of tan or black fishnets, black briefs, crop tops, bras, and the occasional pieces of lingerie. There are only two women not wearing black, and both have chosen to wear a deep red crop top.

### **10:00 a.m. – IT BEGINS**

The first group of women, myself included, are called into the audition room at exactly 10 a.m. The atmosphere becomes a little more intense and the chatting lowers to hushed tones. To my surprise I don't feel nervous. I kind of feel one with my dance community at this moment in time. All of us are competing for a role in the show, but at the same time I can tell that there is a lot of supportive energy being given off in the room.

On the far left side of the audition room sits a table with about five people behind it. A petite and plump woman with glasses, who I guess is the casting director, flips through all of the headshots and begins to read through the resumés. Another woman who looks about 35 steps out into the middle of the room and introduces herself as the choreographer. She immediately begins teaching us a combination to a song that is in no way related to *Chicago*. Some elements of the choreography reflect the sexiness of the show, but it mainly consists of simple technique and minimal style. The combination is about 30 seconds long and is taught at a very rapid pace.

At this point I feel very confident with my dancing abilities and I am able to pick up the choreography easily. I notice that a lot of other girls in the room are struggling with learning the choreography and to my surprise it does not look like they have a lot of formal dance training. It's interesting to see that the women who I thought looked very confident outside the room are actually not as talented as I thought they would be.

The choreographer breaks us up into groups of four and begins the audition. I am in the second group, and my moment to shine goes by in a flash. After we all do the combination once through, the director asks us to switch lines and do it again. Just like that, it's over. I notice that the director wrote down something on my resumé, but I couldn't quite read her facial expression to figure out if it was positive or not. After the rest of the 30 dancers finish their audition, are all asked to leave the room and wait outside.

### **10:50 a.m. – THE BEGINNING OF A STORY OR THE END OF A CHAPTER**

As we come out of the room I notice some faces of the dancers who had just auditioned with me. Some look defeated, others look very proud, and the rest look anxious. We stand around the audition door for about two minutes, not saying a word to one another. Then, the monitor comes out of the audition room with a stack of headshots in his hands.

“If I call your name please come back at 2 p.m. with a 16-bar golden age song. If I do not call your name, thank you for auditioning and have a great rest of your day.”

The monitor begins calling names from the stack of headshots in his hand. My heart is pounding, like my lungs are contracting and not able to take in much air. He keeps reading

names off, none of which are mine. He got to the last three resumés in his pile, and I thought for sure he was going to call my name...but alas he did not.

About 15 of the 30 women that had just auditioned were called back to sing. Getting called back means that the casting director and choreographer are interested in you and want to see more of you and your vocal abilities. I notice the 15 women they called back all look to be 5'7 or below. My guess was that they have a shorter female lead and wanted the ensemble to be around the same height as her. My new friend Nicole did not get called back either.

The women who are called back looked happy but do not overly emote or brag in any way. Those of us who were not called back quickly grab our bags and leave the building.

### **11:30 a.m. – MORE THAN ONE FISH IN THE SEA**

As I left the building there was a moment of heartbreak. I didn't necessarily feel like crying but a little part of my confidence had been chipped away. I started to begin my post-audition ritual which included the following steps (which I think every dancer should have some variation of this in order to keep them sane after every audition). I repeat the following to myself...

1. You are enough.
2. You never know what casting directors are looking for. There is no personal attack being made on you. You didn't fit with what they were looking for and that is OK.
3. Everything happens for a reason.
4. You are awesome.
5. You are a phenomenal dancer
6. You are uniquely you

These six phrases keep my head held high after auditions. Sure, you have that moment of sadness, but you have to build yourself up—or else the industry will get to you. Most importantly, remember that someone out there will love you and will need exactly what you have to offer. I am in no way discouraged. In fact, I am extremely excited to keep on this journey when I graduate with my dance and drama major.

See you soon, NYC.

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