

How to be Prepared for Auditions in New York

After encountering New York and listening to advice, one dancer recommends quality over quantity—and plenty of preparation and research

by Tivoli Evans

Here's why you should choose to audition well, rather than to audition frequently.

Last summer, I made the decision to attend The New York Satellite Program, during my senior year of college at University of California, Irvine, to gain some insight about what I want to pursue after graduation. The UCI Drama Department offers a New York Satellite Program as a four-week intensive in the big city, choosing about twenty-six students to take classes from some very well-known Broadway dancers, actors, and teachers. I have always known that I wanted to dance after college, but I was not sure what field I wanted to enter. It was not until I arrived in New York City and started the program that I finally figured out where I really belonged.

Like any other over-excited dancer in the program, I spent my first few days trying to attend as many open dance auditions as I possibly could. However, once my New York City program schedule started, I was not encouraged to attend multiple auditions as I had expected. My first thought was, "My teachers obviously do not want me to find work?" and "They clearly do not want me to succeed?" It was not until one of our guest faculty members, Denis Lambert, said, "As a dancer or actor, you need to audition well, not audition frequently," that I understood why I was wrong. He said it would be better to be 100% confident going into one audition a month, than going into many not being fully prepared. As a performer, it is crucial to know the in's and out's of auditioning in New York City. I found out it only takes one good audition to change your life. As an auditioning dancer, you need to pick and choose wisely.

Moving to New York and starting a new chapter of life can be terrifying—and expensive. The rent is costlier, the food is more expensive, and you avoid car expenses, public transportation still costs money. According to Brian Blithe, another NYC Satellite professor and theater director in NYC, "A performer needs to have a day job, especially when he or she is first starting to audition for productions." Finding a place to live and a steady source of income is the first and foremost step. My friend, Bryce Vaeworn, a NYC resident and fellow performer, currently works at a preschool called Playgarden, as a source of income while he attends auditions on his days off. Another colleague, Laura Hanlon, works as a Pilates instructor at a gym called Equinox down the street from the Metropolitan Opera House, and on her free afternoons, she attends open dance calls. It is more beneficial to keep a steady income and only attend specific auditions that are the right fit and are conveniently scheduled than not having enough money afford rent.

In today's auditioning world, casting agents will be looking for something very specific. As the auditioner, you always want to be ready for anything. In a private interview with Joy Dewing, a well-known casting director, she stated that, while auditioning, "You must be prepared and have done your homework ahead of time" (also a tip she gives in de Giere, listed below). What does this homework entail? Research. Casting calls will list specific instructions for each audition that detail what to bring, what to wear, and what to sing. Do not overlook this information, it is the first thing the casting agents will look at, to see if you can follow directions and if you are actually prepared. In other words, "Don't waste someone's time if you're 29 and they're looking for a 13-year-old girl, just to be seen" (Hetrick).

In an interview with *Playbill* magazine, casting director Bernard Telsey points out, “It’s very important to read whatever clues are out there,” and that, “Some actors don’t even ask to read the breakdown if it wasn’t given to them by the agent or the assistant” (Hetrick). A “breakdown” is the instructions given online that details what to wear, what to sing, and what to bring to a specific audition. For example, an open call for *Mamma Mia* might say to wear danceable street clothing and prepare 16-bars of a pop-rock song. If you come into the audition wearing a black leotard and pink tights, you will feel very out of place and show the casting team that you do not follow instructions. If the specifics are not listed, dress for the audition you are attending. This means you should research the show and find out what would be appropriate to wear. Telsey states, “If you’re going in for Galinda in *Wicked*, don’t come in wearing a Galinda dress, but don’t come in wearing just jeans and a sweater... You have to know what the essence of that person is” (Hetrick).

In New York City, there is a huge network of actors, singers, and dancers, all attending the same auditions. It is a competitive field, so it’s crucial to be on your game. Some auditions are so popular that the casting team will not have enough time to see everyone. Often, a sign-in sheet for auditioners will start in the early hours of the morning. Rejinald Woods, a company member of the Classical Theatre of Harlem, admits that the saying, “The early bird gets the worm” actually does serve a purpose. She notes that during audition season, “Your day starts around 5 a.m.” (Gardner). Trying to get up at 5:00 a.m. every morning to go to auditions, juggling work, and remaining sane, is not realistic, so it makes sense to choose specific auditions wisely.

In addition to being prepared to dance at a Broadway dancer call, you must have an appropriate 16-bar cut ready to sing if you are asked to stay. Unlike auditioning for concert dance, you have to be able to tell a story by singing. This is a skill that most dancers overlook. Today, the auditioning staff does not just look at technique, they look for personality, type, character, and whether or not the dancer can actually communicate and emote her dancing and singing. You must have a book of sheet music prepared with all types of musical theater genres and you must be ready to sing any of those songs at any point in time. Joy Dewing states, “You really have to keep your audition skills sharp. It’s really important to practice all the songs in your book” (de Giere), because you never know if the casting team will ask you to sing multiple songs. Also, you need to “know what you’re singing about, and to whom you’re singing, as well as the meaning of every single word of the lyric” (Marks). The casting team does not care if you can belt ridiculously high notes if you are dead in the eyes. You have to study your lyrics and know what story you are trying to tell in 30-45 seconds of music. To audition well is to walk confidently into the audition room and know exactly what you are singing about, what you are emoting, and what you are trying to say.

When attending an audition, research and study who you are auditioning for, because each casting agent is a person with very particular opinions. At the New York Satellite Program, I had multiple workshops in which casting directors would work with our group and give their own audition advice. Michael Cassara, from Michael Cassara Casting, pointed out that he prefers audition-goers to use the room when they sing, meaning, he would rather a singer look around the room and move when he or she sings, instead of just standing in the space and staring at a spot above the audition table. However, Dale Brown, another notable casting director, stated that he would rather the singer focus on one spot on the wall and not move. Although it is just a slight difference in focus, it could make or break an audition. Each casting team will have their own preferences. It is your responsibility to find out what he or she prefers without blatantly asking

them. Joy Dewing advises to, “Keep a log of all the auditions you go to, what you sang, who was in the room, and any feedback you got” (de Giere). That way if you have another audition with someone you have already auditioned for, you have notes to help you better prepare and improve.

If an engineer does not build a bridge without first fully researching and studying every inch of it, then why would a dancer or actor go into an audition without being fully prepared? By choosing the auditions you’re best suited for and being 100% prepared, you’ll show who you are and what you can do. If you’re not called back, you will not go home thinking, “I could have done more.” Instead, you’ll realize you did your best and maybe you were just not the right type for the specific role. Auditions are an essential part of the performer’s lifestyle. One good audition has the ability to change your life forever.

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