

National Association of Schools of Dance

ADVISORY

Transitions from High School, Professional Studio Schools, or Undergraduate Programs to Professional Companies

Definition of a Professional Company

Professional companies are organized to present dance at the highest artistic levels. They range from long-established, world-famous groups to newly formed organizations developing their reputations. Professional companies are highly selective in hiring dancers. In making determinations about where you want to apply and audition, please consider the questions posed below. Remember, however, that companies that interest you may not have an opening, or may not accept you, at least at first. Careful consideration of all the issues listed below is important to your future.

Considering and Choosing a Professional Company

You have many choices among dance companies from which you may seek an audition. Your task is to match your talents, capabilities, needs, personality, and goals with a number of companies that seem suitable. It takes effort to accomplish this task effectively, but the right match is worth the effort. Here are some important questions to get you started.

- What do dance professionals in your area think about specific companies? Ask your own teachers and other respected teachers and dancers. These professionals may be found in local dance companies, performance-oriented high school programs, private studios, professional studio schools, and institutions of higher education. When getting advice about companies, ask for more than one recommendation.
- What does your study of published materials and web sites from a variety of companies tell you about possibilities? As early as possible, you need to obtain a package of employment information from a sufficient number of companies to make comparisons. A thorough study of materials will enable you to ask good questions and, eventually, to make good decisions.
- What does your review of dance publications and web sites tell you about possibilities? Magazines, journals, the Internet, and other publications focused on dance can provide important information. If you don't know how to start, find a dance professional who can guide you.
- What can you learn from an on-site visit or participation in a summer educational or performance program at one or more companies? Personal experience is the best way to get a sense of what a particular company is like. Many companies have professional studio schools that provide summer programs. These are an excellent introduction to the way a professional company works. Participating in a number of summer programs provides broad exposure to the differences among companies.
- What can you learn from seeing dance performances by various companies? Performance is the primary indicator of a company's philosophy, approach, and repertory. Is a particular company doing the style of dance you want to do?

- What are the reputations of various dance companies? Reputation is more than a record of successful seasons or famous performers or name recognition. You should focus on the company's reputation for artistry, its fairness and integrity, and its approach to the individual dancer and his or her development. When seeking information from individuals about reputation, ask for how long and in what ways the individual has known the company. If possible, talk with members of the company.
- Who are the artistic staff? What is their approach to dancing and dancers?
- What is the repertory? What repertory is resident with the company? How much guest choreography is performed?
- How realistic are your choices based on your preparation to enter and sustain work at the level a particular company requires? You may have to make a transition from being the "best dancer" in your current situation to being a junior participant in a difficult and highly disciplined preparation and performance regime that demands constant use of your skills to the highest level. It is best to talk to current or recently retired company members to gain an understanding of what is expected. Professional companies will not retain a dancer that is not able to sustain work at the highest artistic level.
- Are members of the company required to join a union? If yes, what are the requirements for union membership?
- What are the performance and touring opportunities and obligations? How many weeks a year does the company usually perform and/or tour? To what extent is the company responsible for travel expenses, and *per diem* costs of food and housing?
- What is the salary and benefits package? To what extent is your compensation able to sustain you in the location where the company is headquartered? How are salaries and benefits determined? What about health insurance? To what extent does the company participate in a health insurance plan for its dancers? To what extent is workers compensation provided? What are the features of the workers compensation program?
- What are the specific provisions of contracts normally offered to new members of the company? What is the length of the contract? What are the conditions under which the contract may be cancelled or renewed? What are your obligations and responsibilities under the contract? What are the company's obligations and responsibilities? Be sure that you are able to understand every word of any contract before you sign it. If there is anything that you do not understand, get someone to help you.
- To what extent does the company offer organized apprentice-trainee or mentoring programs?
- What facilities does the company use? An on-site visit is the best way to answer this question. Is the dance rehearsal and performance space safe, well ventilated, and equipped with proper flooring? Are you comfortable with the location of the company's rehearsal and performance facilities? What kind of support staff is available? To what extent is the company associated with professionals in medicine, physical therapy, massage, counseling, etc.?
- If you are auditioning as a high school student, are there opportunities to pursue work at the college level while being employed at the company? To what extent does the company provide educational opportunities, either on its own or in cooperation with other institutions?
- To what extent does the company provide career transition assistance?

The Audition and Application Process

At some point, it is important to determine which companies have job openings. It is also important to be aware of audition schedules for all of the companies that interest you. It is wise to consider the application process and the audition as two evaluations in one: the company's assessment of your candidacy, and your assessment of the suitability of the company.

- What kinds of auditions are acceptable to the company? There is unanimous agreement in the dance community on the importance of on-site auditions. However, off-site auditions or audition through electronic means may be used in the early stages of the process. It is advisable to obtain schedules and expectations for auditions and applications in your junior year of high school.
- What specific documents are required for applications? For example, does the company require a résumé, letters of recommendation, photographs, medical certifications of health and fitness, and so forth?
- What does the application process cost, including travel to auditions?
- What requirements must you meet if you are an international applicant? You must have a proper visa and otherwise meet all foreign worker requirements of the government of the United States. In addition, the company may have specific requirements such as language proficiency.
- What is the company's track record in hiring out of its own school in contrast to hiring dancers trained in other programs? If applicable, to what extent does the company have a track record of hiring dancers just graduated from high school?
- What are company expectations with regard to your representation by an agent? May you audition as a free agent?
- How familiar can you become with the audition's environment? Experienced professionals advise you to audition as often as you can. In other words, practice auditioning at every opportunity because it is a mainstay of the dancer's life. Successful dancers persevere; they keep trying even if they don't "win" every time.
- What are the company's policies and track record of hiring and position continuity?
- To what extent is your way into the company through a one- or two-year apprenticeship through membership in a second company or a junior company?

Relocation

It is important to have a clear understanding of what is involved in moving from your present home to the location of the company. This means considering a number of issues.

- What are the elements in calculating the overall costs of living in the location of the company? These include, but are not limited to, housing and food, transportation, clothing and shoes, insurance, medical and other maintenance costs, education, and so forth. Is it necessary to obtain a second job in order to cover your living expenses? How will you deal with layoff periods? Dancers in many companies do not work in that company every week of the year. How will you deal with budget management, health insurance, and other critical maintenance

items during these periods? It is important to know in advance the number of weeks of employment the company normally provides its dancers.

- Housing is a particularly important consideration. To what extent does the company assist dancers in finding suitable housing? To what extent are you prepared to share housing in order to find affordable living space?
- What are the safety issues that you must address in your new location with respect to housing, travel to and from your place of employment, and the company location? No matter what the environment, what precautions must you take to protect your safety?
- What types of settings appeal to you—urban, suburban, or rural? If you have no experience in living in the setting you have chosen, be sure to seek information from those with experience about what living in that setting is like.

Professional Behavior/Expectations

- What are the company's expectations with regard to daily class? Does the company offer or require daily class, or are dancers encouraged to take daily class elsewhere? To what extent is daily class seen as maintenance or as continuing growth and development?
- What opportunities exist for continuing education and training in dance and related fields? For example, are there apprenticeship opportunities in such areas as teaching and administration? To what extent does the company have a network that assists dancers in finding dance-related jobs outside the company? Does the company have a community or pre-professional school and opportunities for dance company members to serve as faculty?
- Is there a dancer hierarchy within the company? If so, what is it and how does it work?
- What etiquette is expected in the work of the company? What are the rules of the company with respect to behavior and relationships among company members and staff?
- What does the company expect of its members with respect to artistic growth and maturity? Is there a probationary or trial period for new members of the company? To what extent is there an evaluation program that provides feedback on progress?
- What is the work ethic of the company? How are its performances put together?