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Classes & Camps

Performance camps: Just for fun or a potential future?

Will attending one help a child go pro? A former camper investigates. By Raven Snook

When I enrolled in the musical-theater summer program at the [Usdan Center for the Creative and Performing Arts](#) at age 12, I had a specific objective: to become a star! Alas, my adolescent dream never came true, but I continue to feed my stage obsession decades later as a critic, patron and occasional Off-Off Broadway performer. According to Dale Lewis, executive director of Usdan, my trajectory is in keeping with the center's mission: "We want our kids to have the arts as a companion for life," he explains. Although youngsters who attend performance camps often harbor professional ambitions, only a small percentage will actually "make it." Consequently, Usdan—like most other programs—encourages a love of, over a life in, the arts.



Usdan Center for the Creative and Performing Arts
Photo by David Karp

"When we audition students, a lot of times we take kids who are less talented and more passionate," says Jessica Bashline, the producing artistic director of [Wingspan Arts](#). On the other hand, entry to [American Ballet Theatre's Young Dancer Summer Workshop](#) is always highly competitive; auditions are held all over the country. Camp artistic director Melissa Bowman insists that it's not about turning pro, but rather "about instilling a love of dance." Still, Bowman admits, "We use the intensives to scout for future talent."

Other programs like [Camp Broadway](#), which offers theater classes with Main Stem actors, don't have auditions at all, accepting kids on a first-come, first-served basis. "We try to create lifelong arts patrons," says former CEO Lisa Poelle.

So does this mean a private coach is the only ticket to the big time? Not necessarily. Although no summer program overtly professes to train kids to go pro, these camps still seem to be productive places for an aspiring celeb to get his start. Every camp we talked to was proud to share stories of its successful alumni: ABT's workshops have spawned a number of the company's well-known dancers, and Usdan counts Mariah Carey—who honed her singing skills as Hodel in *Fiddler* while at camp—among its former students. Frank Cipolla, whose 14-year-old daughter, Deanna, was in the chorus of the recent revival of *Bye Bye Birdie*, says Camp Broadway helped her get the gig. "It provided Deanna with a foundation that enabled her to audition for Broadway," he says.

But all of the camp representatives agree: Fame should never be a child's ultimate goal. "We're building audiences and artistic communities," Lewis told me. "We have graduates in every walk of life. Just look at you."

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