**The “It” Factor**

**Posted on September 13, 2008 by** [**Jen Jones Donatelli**](http://www.dance-teacher.com/author/jjones/)

For dance teachers preparing students for competition, all kinds of factors come into play when shaping the total performance package—from flawless technique to eye-catching choreography. Yet even with all the right puzzle pieces, a performance can fall flat without that ever-elusive quality: stage presence. “I’ll often see brilliant dancers who are amazing but just lifeless,” says Kitty Carter, owner of Dallas-based studio Kitty Carter’s Dance Factory and the technical coach for the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders.

On the other hand, one or two dancers always seem to stand out from the crowd. Along with top-notch technical ability, these performers exude a “certain something” that makes them irresistible to watch. Just what is it? And can “it” somehow be taught or nurtured? DT spoke with Carter and two other experienced dance teachers to find out.

**Defining the X-Factor**

For Carter, stage presence is about “living your life through your movement, and being in the moment. It’s about making every audience member’s neck protrude while you’re dancing, and it’s not until you’re finished that they’re able to relax,” she says. “If you don’t bring the audience in, you haven’t succeeded performance-wise.”

That “it” quality is what makes all the difference, she says. “Everyone thought Travis would win [Season 2 of “So You Think You Can Dance”] because he is a fabulous dancer,” she recalls. “But Benji was by far the better performer. And the same was true with Danny and Sabra.” Carter also cites dancer and former student Nick Florez, who has danced backup for such artists as Britney Spears and Janet Jackson, as an example: “Nick was scrawny and skinny; yet even though his body was a lamb, he danced like a lion.”

Michele Ryan, a competition judge and owner of Studio 1 Dance Center in Naples, Florida, says that it’s a performer’s “ability to project a sense of ease, poise and self-assurance” that captivates audiences. “Dancers with stage presence project in such a way that they take the audience with them,” she explains, adding that they “surprise the audience; they’re not predictable.”

Valerie Smith Byron, owner of Dance Delaware in Wilmington, DE, thinks that a performer’s charisma has a lot to do with his or her passion. “When dancing onstage, your love for dancing needs to shine through,” she says. “A dancer is basically that shining light that gives people watching the show two hours of enjoyment, away from their jobs or anything going on in their personal lives.”

**Nature vs. Nurture**

So is the adage that “you either have ‘it’ or you don’t” true? “I’m a firm believer that stage presence is innate,” says Carter. “Greatness comes from within.” Ryan is of the same opinion: “Stage presence definitely comes naturally for some and is a struggle for others,” she says. “When you’re watching someone with a fake, pasted-on smile, it almost distracts you from the choreography. If you don’t have your heart and soul in the dance, it’s going to show.”

Yet all agree that although stage presence can’t be taught, there are methods for bringing out the performer within every dancer. “The most gifted people have an innate talent, not a taught one,” says Carter. “However, good dancers can learn to use what they have.” Adds Smith Byron, “As teachers, we can make it grow within a student.”

Here are some ideas for developing stage presence in your students:

* Start out on a good note. Make sure the music is an integral part of any performance you’re coaching. Smith Byron and her dancers often listen to songs together from a lyrical standpoint. Chances are, if dancers are able to connect with and communicate the message in a song, they will establish a stronger bond with the audience. “It’s all about relating to the song, understanding what you are dancing to and fulfilling each moment,” says Smith Byron, adding that she breaks down every 8-count and asks dancers to explore their emotions. “Sometimes I ask them to close their eyes, feel the music and see what hits them naturally. If they smile or feel sadness, we add the facial reaction to the movement.”
* Leave the comfort zone. To coax dancers to shed their inhibitions and react more naturally onstage, Carter often institutes what she calls “freestyle circles” during class. “Freestyling is a great teaching tool because it enables students to give their all on a moment’s notice,” she says. “It’s that self-assurance that brings their game to the next level.”
* Channel the actors within. As a former theatrical performer, Ryan finds it extremely beneficial to offer dancers drama classes. Like Smith Byron, she has students assume various moods and pair them with facial expressions and poses. “I ask my kids to let dance class be their outlet to get their emotions and frustrations out,” she explains. “With the little ones, it can be harder since they haven’t been through as many emotional experiences. I do more funny, silly things with them, like, ‘Mom tells you to go clean your room—what do you do?’ They’ll give me yucks and frowns, and I’ll say, ‘Go bigger! Overdo it.’”

Of course, the benefits of cultivating stage presence extend far beyond the stage. By doing so, you can help dancers obtain invaluable life skills. “Every career and every form of art requires stage presence; it’s in you—it’s the person who you are,” says Ryan. “And just like anything else, if you don’t have it in you, you just need to work a little bit harder.” DT

1. In your opinion, what makes a good performer?

1. Does being a good performer mean that you are a perfect dancer? why?

1. If you have perfect technique does that mean you are an excellent performer? Why not?

1. What three suggestions does the author offer for helping a student develop stage presence? (\*hint\* look at the bullet points\*)

1. What does the author mean by “Nature vs Nurture” and which category do you think you fall into?

1. What is one performance goal you have for yourself?