Auditioning and Landing a Job: *Hamilton* Dancer Kamille Upshaw

**By Fran Kirmser**

Truly, one of the artistic phenomena of our time is *Hamilton*, on Broadway. Equally as weighted is one of our living legends in choreography, Lar Lubovitch, whose work has been hailed by critics and audiences alike. So if you are a dancer, how do you work at the highest level in both a commercial musical-theater production, like *Hamilton*, and in the fine performing arts world of concert dance, with a great choreographer such as Lar Lubovitch? Enter Kamille Upshaw—beautiful inside and out, extremely put together, and professional and articulate with every re- sponse. Kind and generous of spirit, Kamille is a great talent who is completely on top of her game. She knows who she is, works tremendously hard, and isn’t afraid of putting herself out there and working on her craft and her business each and every day. Kamille Upshaw offers gifts of insight below.

*How did you start dancing?*

My love for the arts began with the tremendous amount of talent that is in my family. I have a cousin who was a very serious dancer when I was younger, along with a few singers, actors, and musicians, but most importantly, my mother was also a dancer! I have this vivid memory of myself, only three years old, attending my mother’s college-reunion dance concert at Howard University. That is the exact moment when my love for the arts sparked. I wanted to be in dance class the next day and all the rest of the days to come. I went to a performing arts middle school, at- tended Baltimore School for the Arts High School, and finally graduated class of 2011 from the Juilliard School. Sharing my love for dance with family and especially with my mother, is still something that is brings me great joy to this day.

*After completing your years at school, did you make a conscious effort to get out there and to be open to both commercial and concert dance work?*

Wise words from my father helped me make the decision from the beginning of my career to stay versatile and open to any and every- thing. I studied really hard in school, primarily focusing on ballet and modern dance. Outside of school I would attend tap, jazz, and musical theater classes because I wanted to be a versatile dancer. I love it all and appreciate what each genre of dance has to offer. Now I can’t imagine a career focused on just one aspect of dance. When I partake in a musical, I find that dance, as the thing that I’ve done forever, can be that stable aspect of the storytelling. It provides a window for acting and singing to then be points of focus. On the other hand, when I get to delve into a masterpiece such as Lar Lubovitch’s *The Black Rose*, I enjoy the freedom and continuous exploration my body experiences through the movement. I’m in love with my career and with being able to experience the best of both worlds!

*What is the difference between a Broadway audition and a modern- dance audition process?*

In a concert-dance audition, you have one way to speak, and that is with your body. The key is to find what makes your way of moving so intriguing that any dance company has to have you. Storytelling is always a common denominator with both audition processes, but most of the time concert dance calls for more abstract movement. In a musical theater audition, the storytelling facts are usually very clear, and in addition to dance, you have to deliver a total package including singing and acting. I find myself having to trust my dancing and delving deeper into my acting choices. The key is to convince casting and the creative team that I em- body the character 100 percent and that I have the dancing and singing on top of that.

*In regard to the audition process, do you have any advice about ac- quiring a job in commercial or concert dance?*

My father once told me, “Networking will be the key to a successful career.” I feel that treating others the way you want to be treated resonates and comes back to you throughout your career. Ties to people along the way help propel your career forward, and I have learned that firsthand. For example, I took classes from Andy Blankenbuehler when I was younger, and I knew that I wanted to work with him someday. I made sure that I walked up to him after auditions and expressed how amazing his choreography was to me and how much I hoped that someday we would work together. Here we are in 2016, and it has been a year since I was hired into the ensemble of *Hamilton: An American Musical*. One of the biggest things I’ve learned over the years of my career is to never be afraid to speak my mind and ask questions. It’s always important to express your interest! When I teach, I encourage young dancers to never forget that. Don’t be afraid to ask, because the worst thing you will hear is *no*. If you never ask, you may not get the information or opportunity you are seeking.

*Is there any advice that you might share that you feel led to and continues to fuel your success thus far?*

No matter how good you are, you are going to hear *no* a lot. More times than not, it will have nothing to do with your talent and ability. It’s important to stay positive and to not take it too personally. No one but the people behind the audition table knows what those people are truly look- ing for, and it sometimes boils down to the simplest thing, like height. I was at my all-time high level of frustration when I attended an audition for Cirque du Soleil. I felt very good about the audition, as I have with many others, but wasn’t sure if it would land me in the same place of rejection. A day later I learned that I got the part, and then a few months later I was cast in *Hamilton* on Broadway as well. It’s true when they say “When it rains, it pours.” As a policy, I always allow myself twenty-four hours to feel frustrated and down, and then I move on to the next goal.

*What was your process like in finding representation?*

I won a competition and walked away from that experience with representation prior to attending Juilliard. That said, while I was at Juilliard, I was so busy studying I couldn’t take advantage of having an agent. After I graduated, my father (manager) helped me a great deal with guidance through rising opportunities. Soon after I graduated, I attended an industry cocktail party for Clear Talent Agency, where I was invited along as the guest of a friend. That was where I put my socializing and networking skills to the test. By the next day, I was represented by Clear Talent Agency, and I have been with them for five years now. Sometimes in this industry it is all about being in the right place at the right time. In commercial work, it is an advantage to have an agent because he or she is your connection to get you invited to calls for small projects or big Broadway shows. I continue to find it important to attend open-call auditions to keep my name fresh in casting’s eyes but also to keep myself humble and hungry for what’s to come next.

*Finally, what are the challenges of working as a swing or understudy versus the challenges of originating new work?*

Both of these roles have big challenges! Certainly, coming into *Hamilton* on Broadway as a swing, I was aware of meeting the expectations of work that was already completed and executed well. Meeting that caliber of excellence and expectation is an innate challenge in that con- text. When originating new work, it is so important to stay open minded in the room while the work is occurring on your body. It is certainly a challenge to keep your instrument and artistic brain open and switched on to experimentation and changes in the process of creating new movement. For me a huge career highlight thus far was working with the living legend Lar Lubovitch in the latest work he made for his company. Creating *The Black Rose* allowed me to feel full of new life and inspiration for three months. I truly enjoy stepping into an already-high-expectation environment and beginning a process with open eyes!