

Aiming for Fame

Eighth-graders showcase their talents for a slim chance to enter Boston Arts Academy

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By Tracy Jan, Globe Staff | February 4, 2007

Manuel Pagan watched, arms folded across his chest, as a tall boy with headphones practiced hip-hop moves in the first-floor assembly hall of Boston Arts Academy. Pagan, short and muscular, figured he could beat this competitor, scheduled to dance next to him before four judges.

"Dancing is my life," the 15-year-old said. "Everybody knows me as Manny the Dance Guy."

Upstairs, on the third floor of the high school, the sounds of saxophones, flutes, and a piano reverberated through the halls as Regina Crawford practiced the drums -- an instrument she picked up just two years ago.

"I feel like I was born to play," said Crawford, 13. "I want to be rich and famous by the time I'm 18."

Down the hall, Jonathan Coppola warmed up for his theater audition, his first ever. Other students made loud noises and exaggerated body movements. Coppola stood back, somewhat stiffly.

"Acting makes me nervous," the 13-year-old said, "but when I actually get up on stage, it feels natural to me because you get to be someone else."

The dreams of the teens were riding on one audition, in some cases, only 15 minutes long.

The eighth-graders' odds of getting into the school across from Fenway Park are slim. Only 25 of 69 would get into dance; three of 18 would join the drummers; and 25 of 81 would be selected for theater.

But all thought they stood a chance of sealing their futures if they could just make the cut. Graduates of the school have earned full scholarships to Berklee College of Music and danced for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. If admitted, students commit to an eight-hour school day, two hours longer than average, to allow for classes in music, dance, theater, or visual arts.

The judges were looking for passion and potential, not polish.

It was not just students who were nervous.

Pagan's mother, a nursing assistant from the Dominican Republic, sacrificed Christmas gifts and family vacations to pay for her son's dance lessons. The night before his audition, the Roxbury teen rehearsed with a private dance teacher at OrigiNation Inc., a dance studio in Roxbury.

"I feel like I'm going to stop breathing," Ircania Torres, said to her son about a half-hour before his audition. "I'm shaking like Jell-O."

Pagan, in black sweat pants and a T-shirt, remained calm and confident. He sat next to his mother, chatting on his cellphone with his girlfriend, a Boston Arts Academy dancer, seeking last-minute audition tips.

The Boston Ballet, on a visit to his third-grade class, had selected him for a yearlong dance scholarship when Pagan was 8. He attends Boston's Orchard Gardens K-8 School and hopes to choreograph and perform in music videos.

First up was a group tryout for aspiring dancers, who had to show that they could pick up ballet moves.

The boy with the headphones, George Moals Tyrie Ruffin, had no training and could only dance hip-hop. Ruffin, 14, wanted to get into the school to keep himself out of trouble. One of his friends was recently killed.

Ruffin struggled to keep up as Pagan and other students did plies and spun in the air. Pagan offered Ruffin guidance, but Ruffin fell twice when he tried to spin.

Just before his solo, Pagan admitted he was nervous. But he danced with confidence for two minutes to a salsa and

merengue mix and threw in a back flip at the end. The judges were so impressed they asked Pagan to perform a second time for the principal.

At the other end of the school, which is in its ninth year, Crawford had a rockier time during her drum audition. She tapped out a jazz beat with ease in front of six judges, but was stumped by a request for bossa nova and samba beats.

Crawford, who dreams of becoming a rock star, practices drums in her grandparents' living room. When she's not practicing there, she bangs her drumsticks on her dresser, stereo, and perfume bottles, annoying neighbors in the Dorchester triple-decker where she lives with her mother, a dental assistant.

While Crawford auditioned for drums and also theater, her mother chatted downstairs with other parents about their sleepless nights worrying whether their children would get in.

Crawford, a student at St. Kevin Elementary School in Uphams Corner, learned to play the drums in a free Saturday music program. She is torn between her competing loves for music and basketball.

"This is like a full-time job, plus some," a judge told her after listening to her play. "You know that at this school, we don't have any sports?"

Crawford nodded and shook every judge's hand. "I can do it."

Coppola, who aspires to be on Broadway, struggled with stage fright during his theater audition. But he held up better than some. One aspiring actress broke down in tears during group warm-ups and needed an hour-long pep talk before she would try again.

Coppola sees acting as an escape. His father died of a stroke while fishing last July.

Coppola, of Revere, liked to don costumes as a toddler, and sung and danced around the house. At age 7, he began performing in a children's drama school. He says he knows all the lyrics to "Grease" and "Chicago." His mother, a retired bartender, hopes to move to Boston if the arts academy accepts him.

For his audition, Coppola memorized a passage from Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun," a play he is reading at the Excel Academy Charter School in East Boston.

"There simply is no blasted God," Coppola blurted out, standing in front of eight judges and eight other students trying out. "There's only man, and it is he who creates miracles."

A judge asked him to redo it, showing more anger and using his body.

Coppola chose the monologue because he identified with a leading character who did not believe in God, the way he has felt since losing his father and all four of his grandparents. "I don't really believe in God all that much anymore," he said. "I like acting because it kind of takes you away from everything in your life that's hard to deal with."

After the audition, Coppola was stoic as he trudged down the stairs to find his mother. He said he sped through his lines and did not get into character enough. "I think I did kind of bad," he said. "I'm just relieved it's over."

Crawford was nonchalant, not certain she got in, but not worried.

Pagan was all smiles as he rushed to meet his mother. "Did you do good good good?" she asked, enveloping him in a hug.

"I messed up like maybe once or twice," Pagan said. "I want to go back in there and dance more."

Acceptance letters will be mailed on Valentine's Day.

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