

SEEN & HEARD AT THE
DANCE TEACHER SUMMIT

SPOTLIGHT ON
AL BLACKSTONE

When he won the 2011 Capezio A.C.E. Award for Choreographic Excellence, Al Blackstone stood out amid a sea of contemporary dancemakers with *Happy We'll Be*, his earnest musical theater piece about finding love. In classes at New York City's Broadway Dance Center and Steps on Broadway, he passes on skills for storytelling through movement. He also teaches all ages on the JUMP convention circuit. Here, he offers tips from his seminar Performance Plus at the *Dance Teacher Summit* for helping dancers connect to their movement.

Dance Teacher: How do you help your youngest dancers develop performance skills?

Al Blackstone: I apply the things I ask for in performance from the beginning of class, instead of waiting until after warm-up to start talking about how to behave onstage. The first thing I do is ask dancers to find a position—in my warm-up we start sitting on our knees, but it could be a standing jazz second—anything where you can get them to be still for a moment, as opposed to putting on music and jumping right into something. I want them to find a quiet, centered place where there's no fidgeting. It's like a game with the kids, because they don't even realize they're fidgeting. To keep it from feeling too serious, the next thing I'll do is have us take this very loud, deep breath, so immediately everyone's making sound—a loud inhale and a loud exhale—so there's a sense that they can participate in the room.

DT: What's your best advice for increasing any dancer's stage presence?

AB: In a group number, have dancers make eye contact with each other. We always focus on how they should



Blackstone knows how to help little ones focus.

connect with the audience, but they should also work on connecting with each other. Looking at each other creates a sense of unity onstage, that they're dancing as an ensemble. It can immediately relax the face and draw a genuine facial expression. It's a great way to get them feeling comfortable onstage.

There should be three conversations happening: the dancer and the audience, the dancer and other people onstage and each dancer and himself. They need to connect with their own inner voice.

DT: Why is developing that inner voice important?

AB: The more we understand the material we're performing, the better the performance, the deeper and more rooted it is. Any soloist doing a number should be able to have a conversation about the piece they're performing. They should have an opinion and be able to speak about it.

—Andrea Marks

Save the date!
Join us in Long Beach, California, July 28–30 for our 2015 *Dance Teacher Summit*. Visit danceteachersummit.com for details.



10 Questions
for Soloists

To get dancers thinking about what a piece means to them, Blackstone asks a series of questions, mostly about the routine's music. It doesn't matter, he says, whether the choreographer can answer all of the questions himself. They are designed to start a conversation.

1. What is the original title of your song? Why do you think the musician chose this title?
2. What is the title of your piece? Why do you think the choreographer chose this title?
3. Who wrote the music? What do you think they were trying to say? Are they telling a specific story? How do you think the musician felt when they wrote the song?
4. What does this song make you feel? What are three emotions that you feel when hearing it? Be specific.
5. Does this song remind you of someone or something that has happened to you? Does it remind you of a film, book or television show?
6. What are three images that come to mind when you listen to this song? (For example, holding hands, the sun, walking home, dancing with friends in your basement, being at a party, etc.)
7. Where is the beginning of the song? Where does the middle of the song begin? Where does the end of the song begin?
8. What is your favorite lyric or moment in the song?
9. If you were speaking, what movements in your routine would be
 - a. whispered?
 - b. spoken aloud?
 - c. shouted?
10. What do you want the audience to feel when watching this choreography?