

'So You Think You Can Dance' premiere: Here's who stood out

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The 'So You Think You Can Dance' judges watch a contestant dance their heart out in the season premiere.

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IMAGE: JEFFREY
NEIRA/FOX

Summer's here and the time is right for *So You Think You Can Dance*.

And with the new season comes a completely new format — as contestants choose whether they're Team Street, dancing improvisational styles like animation and hip-hop, or Team Stage, showing formally trained styles like contemporary and jazz.

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Also new? Judges Jason Derulo and Paula Abdul, who join executive producer Nigel Lythgoe (Sir!). I'm not sure why they're pushing Derulo so much. His music is fun, though I'm personally insulted by his dopey "Wiggle" song, but I'm not sure if he deserves such a huge spot on the show.

As the auditions get underway, little seems to have changed: dancers get on stage and do their best to impress the judges. Many succeed too, especially in Memphis, the first stop on the audition tour. Eventually, though, I realize that there's no choreography round: dancers are either straight through to Vegas, or they're rejected. That changes the drama a little bit.

Speaking of drama, on day 2 of the Memphis auditions, all of Downtown Memphis loses power because of an underground fire. The question of whether or not auditions can continue hangs over the dancers' heads for most of the day; some of them had spent their life's savings to travel there.

Fortunately, a generator is set up at the performing space, but with this good news comes some darker news for the hopefuls: Because the start of auditions was delayed so significantly, there would be a change in the audition procedure. Dancers are grouped according to style and have to really stand out in order to get a solo audience with the judges. It's such a shame the auditions were limited, but it should also be pointed out that it's more like a professional audition this way.

Among the street dancers, Andre Rucker, the latest Dragon House initiative, impresses with his funky arm moving snakily around his head. Vishonda Sims, who had to take care of her grandmother after a car crash left her paralyzed when Vishonda was 8 years old, gives a soulful routine that hits hard, even though it doesn't contain enough vocabulary. And Ladia Yates has thrust, strength, and personality, impressing with her Memphis jookin' and her

Yates has thrust, strength, and personality, impressing with her Memphis jookin' and her nerve-wracking ankle rolls. (She even flirts with Judge Jason, who comes up on stage with her team of young street dancers; how could they not give her a ticket after all that).



Dancers wait to audition in Memphis on 'So You Think You Can Dance.'

SYTYCD clearly has no appreciation for "geek chic," though, as they don't seem to expect much from nerd Stephen Ban, who looks like Bill Gates, but Stephen surprises them with his magical illusion animation. They kindly give him a ticket to Vegas, but we'll see how far he gets.

Of course, the stage dancers are out in full force, and mostly beautiful. Jordan "Jo-Jo" Hilgenberg, who looks uncannily like Alyson Hannigan, is the first of the Teeny Bikini Club (the women contemporary dancers), but she is a stunning dancer: gorgeous lines, great control, beautiful pictures, and incredible feet. She'll probably do well on the show.

Jacklyn Hamric surprises me with her slow jazz, dancing beautifully while not being too much of a sex kitten, showing expression and musicality as well as technique. I also really appreciate that she wears pants.

Lily Leyva shows tremendous strength and control in that slow reverse backbend, flexing every muscle in her body — and not giving the judges any opportunity to talk to her. Edson Juarez, who auditioned last season and got to the Green Mile, closes out the show with his audition, showing every muscle in his body through his undulating technique and engaging with the camera — though perhaps not enough with Nigel.

An early standout so far is Guillermo Antonio Morales de la Cruz, the valet parking attendee who is putting himself through college. I figure he'll be good because they spend so much money and time putting together that video of him with the cars and the scantily clad women, but he is so much more than that. I love everything about him: his personality, his dancing, his performance, his technique and musicality, and especially his story. He started dancing only three years ago, after doing community service at a dance studio, and discovered that after years of doing sports, dancing is more challenging to him. I want to learn so much more about that story. As Nigel mentions, "He's a star," and I think he'll go far on the show.

So now we have 42 stage and 37 street dancers headed to Las Vegas. So far so good. It's not surprising that the stage group is ahead, but that could change as we head to Detroit next week.

So what do you think, dance fans? Which dancers stand out for you so far? What do you think of the new Stage vs. Street format? Are you psyched for SYTYCD season 12? Let us know your thoughts in the comments.

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