

INTERVIEW BY TED SOD

# Andy Blankenbuehler

IN A SPLIT  
SECOND



There is no clear-cut path to becoming a choreographer for the Broadway stage. Many have started as performers and worked their way up; others have done a lot of assisting, learning on the job. Since arriving in New York in 1990, Andy Blankenhauer has successfully worked as a dancer/singer/actor, a teacher, a choreographer, and, most recently, a director. His work ethic, skill, and versatility—and his understanding of what makes popular entertainment—are evident in all of his shows. He has completely immersed himself in hip-hop, competitive cheerleading, and the Great Depression in shows as diverse as *In the Heights*, *Bring It On*, and *Annie*. In this interview with SDC Member **Ted Sod**, he recounts his early influences, sheds light on his remarkable process, and talks about the delicate balancing of career and family life.

TS | I'd like to start with your background. I read you're from Ohio.

AB | I grew up in Cincinnati.

TS | Can you tell us about your trajectory to New York, how you got involved in dance?

AB | I went to a little studio in Cincinnati, and my mom sat outside and sewed while I danced. I had a very mathematical mind, and I could remember the steps, and I was very good at tap dancing, but I didn't necessarily love it. I was the only boy and it wasn't something I could really brag about or talk about. And then I started doing musicals in high school, and I just absolutely fell in love with what I was doing.

TS | I read you went to St. Xavier.

AB | I went to St. Xavier High School, a college prep school, and it was there that I started doing musicals. I did three musicals my sophomore, junior, and senior years. Junior year I actually choreographed the musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. I always grew up with the mentality that I was going to go into an academic field. I didn't know anybody, men especially, in the business. I just assumed I was going to be an architect. I started applying to colleges. I got into some good schools for architecture and for visual arts. By that point in time, I was dancing constantly. I idolized Mikhail Baryshnikov and Gregory Hines. We converted a room in the house into a dance studio, and I would just practice. I would practice one step over and over and over again for hours. I changed my plans and reapplied to schools with dance. I'd gotten scholarships to NYU, as well as Point Park, but I wasn't ready to move to New York City as an 18-year-old; I was daunted by the city. But somebody at NYU told me about SMU in Dallas, and said there was a really great jazz teacher named Max Stone there. So I flew down on a Tuesday to Dallas and was enrolled on a Thursday. Earlier that summer I had done my first professional job at Kings Island, a theme

park in Cincinnati. I was over the moon. I couldn't believe somebody was paying me—I think it was like \$149 a week for five shows a day.

TS | Just like Disney!

AB | That was my second job, the summer after my freshman year. I had a total ball dancing in front of the castle. My time spent at Disney was great, because I got to see how many thousands of people that kind of big entertainment affects. Those bold brushstrokes were really important for me to learn, in terms of what I would do in the future as a choreographer. I like commercial entertainment that has really strong brushstrokes; but at the same time, the more subtle, artistic side is very important to me, too. At the end of that summer gig, they offered me a job at Tokyo Disneyland for the coming year. I told my professors that I wanted to pursue this, and they actually said, "So you're going to leave school just so you can go to New York and dance in some, like, touring chorus of *Oklahoma!*?" And I replied, "YES! That's exactly what I want to do. I just want to dance."

TS | Which year was that?

AB | I moved here in 1990 when I was 20 years old.

TS | And you immediately got work?

AB | Yes and no. I started taking three classes a day. I thought that I could continue my education here, while trying to be a professional dancer. What I believe now is that you can always keep improving, but as soon as you enter the work force, only some things continue to improve. Technique doesn't necessarily improve unless you're studying constantly. Your work savvy improves, your performance ability, the nuances of learning the business improves, but once you get busy auditioning, learning how to be good on stage, you slow down other parts of your learning. I auditioned for everything—my audition technique got better—and then a couple of months after

I moved here I got offered an international company of *Cats*, and the same week I got offered a dinner theatre production of *A Chorus Line*. **Rob Marshall** was directing and choreographing it. So I passed on my dream show, *Cats*, to do *A Chorus Line*.

TS | Did you play Mike?

AB | I played Mark. [Laughs.] I know. I remember so specifically what Robbie did the first day of *A Chorus Line* rehearsals. He met with every person in the company individually to talk about how they felt about the show. As a director, now, it's a reminder to me that it's all about that relationship, it's all about an open dialogue with your cast. *A Chorus Line* really set me up in a lot of ways, because I continued to work with Robbie and **Kathleen [Marshall]**, his sister, who was his assistant. Through Kathleen I met **Scott Ellis**. Scott Ellis is how I met **Susan Stroman**.

TS | It sounds as if you were already thinking about becoming a choreographer.

AB | Even when I was 12 years old I was choreographing my own solos at dance school. For me, the battle has always been scale. I don't remember the exact words, but the first chapter in **Twyla Tharp's** most recent book talks about how different artists create on different scales—some people make really big pictures, and other people create tiny pictures. So for me, even from a very young age, I was always about trying to figure out how big of a story I wanted to tell, and most of the time, I bit off more than I could chew.

TS | It seems as if the jobs you got as a performer helped build your vocabulary as a choreographer/director.

AB | I loved the score of *A Chorus Line* because the trumpets, the percussion spoke to me as a dancer and as a choreographer. I feel accents and I feel rhythm. After I worked with Robbie on *A Chorus Line*, I spent a summer with him at the Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera. And

after that I did *West Side Story* at Paper Mill Playhouse, which was a dream. I freaking love that show more than anything.

TS | And who was the choreographer on that *West Side Story*?

AB | **Alan Johnson**, whom I've become good friends with. But I got hurt in that show; I hurt my knee, and at that same time, I got my first offer for a Broadway show, the revival of *The Most Happy Fella*, and I had to turn it down.

TS | Was that *The Most Happy Fella* directed by **Gerald Gutierrez**?

AB | Yes. It came in from Goodspeed. I had this dark cloud over me, thinking, "This was supposed to be my avenue; why aren't I dancing on Broadway?" But in retrospect it was actually good for me. You know in the movie *The Matrix*—how when he sees the numbers he understands how it works? During that time, I started listening to Ella Fitzgerald and Sammy Davis, Jr., music where the brass arrangements and percussion arrangements are so bold and so dynamic and intense, and I would listen to that stuff over and over on the exercise machines, and all of a sudden I felt like I was floating in that music. I felt like I understood it a lot more. From that point on, there was no looking back in terms of where I wanted to go stylistically with my movement. A couple of months later, I bounced back. I did a production of *42nd Street* out on the road and then I booked my first teaching job at age 22. It was really good for me to use that as an opportunity to articulate my artistic impulses. Through teaching I learned to analyze what I wanted to do artistically. When I start to choreograph something, I sit down and write a document. My brain locks into, "Yes, I agree with that," or "No, I don't agree with that." I'm not this crazy talent who can just go into a studio and wing it. I have to think about what makes a person's body language say that they're shy or that they're hurting inside. I have to think about that for a long time until I can roll the shoulders to the right place. I can't just walk in the room and make a shy person.

TS | Which jobs or experiences most influenced your identity as an artist?

AB | I desperately wanted to do the **Jerry Zaks** revival of *Guys and Dolls*, and I took dance classes with **Chris Chadman**, who scared the hell out of me. I loved his stuff, the staccato nature of it all was exhilarating to me. It was like a more fuel-injected version of that Fosse-era 1950s stuff that was so isolation based, and I just instantly loved it. He was really rough in the studio; he just knew what he wanted to see, and he put blinders on to get what he wanted from the dancers. But that didn't put me off at all. I didn't get the Broadway revival of *Guys and Dolls*. I got the national tour and

toured with it for a year and a half, and then I went into the Broadway cast. That national tour was filled with an unbelievable group of male dancers—**Sergio Trujillo**, **Chris Gattelli**, **Darren Lee**, **Jerome Vivona**—all of whom went on to have careers as choreographers. Then while in *Guys and Dolls* on Broadway, I herniated two discs in my back and I was out for 18 months. That was a really hard time for me, because I was getting offers for new Broadway shows, and I couldn't accept them.

TS | You continued to perform after you recovered from your injury, correct?

AB | Correct. I toured with *The Music of the Night*, working with Kathleen Marshall, Scott Ellis, and **John DeLuca**. I got into *Steel Pier* with Stroman and Scott Ellis. I did *Big* for Stroman and *On the Town* in the park with **Eliot Feld**; I did the workshop of *Parade* with Hal Prince

I started listening to Ella Fitzgerald and Sammy Davis, Jr., where the brass and percussion arrangements are so bold, so dynamic and intense, and I would listen over and over; all of a sudden I felt like I was floating in that music. I felt like I understood it. From that point on, there was no looking back in terms of where I wanted to go stylistically with my movement.

and **Danny Ezralow**; I did the workshop of *Fosse*. *West Side Story* and *Fosse* are the two biggest college courses you can take. My time with *Fosse* was great. One of the things Chris Chadman would do that **Fosse** did is he would hit a move fast enough so that there was a pause before and a pause after, and if the definition of the move was telling enough in that split second of a pause, the audience would take in what was meant. The audience could perceive character or a mood through what they were seeing physically. The pause before and the pause after was what made it happen for me. So more and more, as a performer and as a choreographer, I was moving ahead of the beat. So even if I was moving on the downbeat, I would attack the front of it with such energy that there would be a pause at the end of it, so the audience could take it in. Chris did that so well.

TS | In 2006, things really started picking up for you as a choreographer, correct?

AB | In 2006, my agent, John Buzzetti, set me up on an interview for *In the Heights*. It was with **Thomas Kail**, the director, and Jeffrey Seller and Kevin McCollum, the producers. During the interview, Jeffrey said, "You're not Latino, you don't do hip-hop, why should I even consider you for this job?" And I didn't want to manipulate him or anything [laughs], but I said, "**Jerome Robbins** was not Latino, and look at *West Side Story*." Because I knew he idolized Jerome Robbins as much as I idolized Jerome Robbins. I said, "I know how to tell a story. I'll figure out the language, I'll figure out how to say it, but I know the story." In the end, I didn't get the job, but I felt I had a good showing and that I'd gotten closer to Jeffrey, and to Tommy and Alex Lacamoire and Lin-Manuel Miranda and these other people I admired. They moved forward with workshops, but eventually the position opened back up. They offered me the show, and then everything changed after that.

TS | Do you have to create a specific vocabulary for every show and dance?

AB | What I do when I first hear the music is dance like myself. And it's usually not right. But it helps to figure out where I want to go. Then I might think, "This has to have a basis in swing dancing," or, "This has to have a basis in whatever it is." So slowly the vocabulary starts to name itself. And it becomes clearer to me that this is how the character would move in this location, and this is how they would move in a social club. Those rules just exist within each particular show. And once I find those rules, then I'm in a safe place, because I know what world that particular number exists in. I'm of the mindset, especially in contemporary theatre, that you can just throw all the paint against the walls. It doesn't matter if it's modern dance, contemporary dance, or the Charleston. I'll put it in the show if it's expressing something. If the show is set in 1920, I'm not going to do hip-hop, because it's not correct. But I might actually start by doing hip-hop steps until I say, "Oh, I love that rhythm! Now let me find some Charleston steps, but I'm going to use that rhythm." So I kind of cross-pollinate the dances. I started doing hip-hop steps to the *Annie* music. They're no longer hip-hop steps, but the rhythms from those early hip-hop steps helped me find the rhythms I wanted to use in the other forms.

TS | Tell us about the genesis of *Bring It On* and how that came together. Who approached you to direct and choreograph, and why?

AB | I was approached because there was so much movement in *In the Heights*, and the producers wanted *Bring It On* to move. I'd never seen any of the *Bring It On* movies, and I knew nothing about cheerleading. I had a relationship with these producers and they

said, "Would you be interested in directing and choreographing it?" I'd never been offered anything as a director. And I was like, "Sure!" I was nervous about taking on a movie as a musical—I hadn't done *9 to 5* yet. I was a little tentative. I knew, since I had no idea what I was doing as a director, that I had to be surrounded by people whom I could trust. Jeff Whitty, Alex Lacamoire, Tom Kitt and Amanda Green, Lin, the designer David Korins—I've worked with all of them before, so I felt safe with them. I said to the producers, "If you're hiring me to direct this, you're basically going to get a full-length ballet. I know how to choreograph, so I'm going to direct my choreography. I'm going to make a big dance show."

TS | What was the preparation like? Are we talking six to eight months? More?

AB | Oh, we've been working on it for about three years now.

TS | I was impressed that there was not only dance and movement that was related to character, but there were full-on acrobatics. How did you enter that world?

AB | When I attended my first cheerleading competition, I'd never heard any place as loud as that arena. The volume was UNBELIEVABLE. I watched what the competitors were doing. They were on the edge of their lives. They were happier than any teenager has ever been and if they fell or if they lost, they were destroyed. But what I noticed in the physicality was that they were doing really intense stuff. I instantly knew that I wasn't going to be able to teach Broadway performers to do this stuff. I wasn't even going to try. I made the decision that if we're going to go the route of competitive cheerleading, we're going to have to devise a show where half the cast can be professional cheerleaders.

TS | And they have to know how to sing!

AB | Yes. In a normal show, say you have ten ensemble members, five of those ensemble members are covering the principals, so they're exceptional at those skills, but all ten of them are all musical theatre triple-threats. But in our show, five of those ten have never done a musical before, not even a first-grade play, so those other five have a whole other set of responsibilities. It's kind of crazy. We decided in the development process to separate every element of the show. We worked on staging with just the actors to see if we liked the book; we worked on cheerleading just with the cheerleaders to figure out how that worked. We devised these systems whereby a person who's done five Broadway shows can step in and learn the part. And the girl who's been flying through the air for 15 years, is flying through the air; it's not new to her. The only exception is our two principal women who also have to go up in the air.



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Andy Blankenbuehler rehearsing  
*In the Heights* with Lin-Manuel Miranda



Blankenbuehler + Jessica  
Lea Patty rehearsing  
*Only Gold*  
PHOTO Jeremy Davis

TS | You're about to work with James Lapine on *Annie*. How did that job come to be?

AB | A couple of years ago I said to my representation, "Here's a short list of directors that I want to work with, because I know I have a lot to learn, so let's pursue those people." And James was on the list. I also wanted to do a period piece. And so when *Annie* came around, we started pushing for the job, and James was very open to me. You know what I love about him? James sat down and quizzed me and was very frank. He liked some of my work, but he had real problems with other parts of my work. And he wasn't afraid to tell me that. We had four interviews.

TS | What was your initial reaction to *Annie* as a choreographer? And how deeply are you into the process?

AB | *Annie* really is a classic score. You hear the music and the emotion just rides straightforward. James and I started by having design meetings. By doing homework even before I came up with the dance steps, I started to know how I wanted the orphanage to move, how I wanted the kids to move, how I thought it could help with the storytelling. It's still going to be a classic revival of *Annie*, but it's going to move in a much different way. It's going to move more fluidly from scene

to scene. As far as process goes, it's just like any other show. I put on the music. And then I create playlists. I listen at the gym; I listen to it on the subway. I improvise to it. I'll go to the dance studio and warm up, and then I'll improvise in the correct shoes. I have to be in shoes that feel like the show, I have to feel like I'm in the world. I can't choreograph *Annie* barefoot. I usually see staging first. If there's a great orchestration moment, I see vocabulary first, and I'll find some cool ideas, like a recurring thumping stomp, and I'll say, "Oh, I love this stomp. Let's make this a motif in a section!" What I do is I chart the number. I follow where Annie goes. One thing that I realized recently was that I way over-choreographed a moment and the little James Lapine on my shoulder was saying, "Why the hell are they dancing?" I realized that they didn't really need to dance. What was needed was the absence of movement.

TS | Do you work with an assistant to find the steps before rehearsals?

AB | I work by myself, trying to figure out how the staging works, starting to come up with steps. I videotape everything. I'll improvise take after take after take, and then I'll realize, "This is all bullshit! They're just dancing people. But I love how my shoulders were there." So it's like adding little layers of paint. And then I'll make

what I call the "core step," and then when I get far enough along, I'll bring my assistant in. And then, when we get a little further along, I'll go in a room with six people and I'll start working on a more realized version of it. I'll bring people into the room to say, "Okay, I want the step to turn like this and stomp on count four."

TS | How much time does that usually require?

AB | I do 75 percent of the work by myself, and another 10 percent with my assistant, and then I do the rest with a core group.

TS | Talk to me about dance arrangements. Are there going to be new arrangements for this?

AB | Yes. Dance arrangement is where it's at. What I've found in the past few years is that if I don't have the musical voice, I actually get paralyzed. And it got to the point last year where I was like, "I can't work without Alex Lacamoire." He's such a musical mastermind that he can take the melodic structure that the composer has written, and if I say, "Now she runs up the steps," he can change it so it sounds like she's running up the steps. He's a true dance arranger in that way. The thing about *Annie*, though, is that it hardly ever breaks open. I'm not much into dance breaks; I want the dance to be on the lyric. You know

what I'm saying? Like in *Oklahoma!*: it's scene, song, ballet. But in today's theatre, people don't really have the patience for that, they want more concentrated storytelling. So I like to try to develop the number on the lyric instead of adding additional time to bring the dance out. That also comes as a result of the fact that most shows economically don't have a dance ensemble anymore; everybody does everything. If you think about it, *In the Heights* only had three male dancers and three female dancers; those were the three same people who were singing in all the big numbers.

TS | How do you juggle your family obligations and your career?

AB | You know, it's intense. My family gets home today. They've been gone for almost a month. My mother-in-law lives in Italy and so we usually go to Italy for the month of July.

TS | Which part?

AB | In a little beach town called Fano on the Adriatic. My son is almost six, and my daughter is three. I couldn't go with them this year because of *Bring It On's* schedule. Years ago I decided, "I'm going to have everything. I'm going to have it all." I'll admit, there are times when I think, "I'm an idiot! You can't have it all." Or at least you can't have it all *all* of the time. But I know I'm going to keep trying to have it all. I do go home and have dinner with my family.

TS | They say that's what Obama does.

AB | It's really important. I have this breakdown with my wife Elly every couple of months because I think maybe I'm taking on too much work or because I missed my kid's first bike ride. People say to me all the time, "Is this business what you thought it would be?" And I say all the time, "I am very lucky, I have a really

It doesn't get easier. In fact, it gets remarkably harder...The valleys can get really, really low, and I think that's what people need to prepare themselves for. The highs are higher than you can imagine, but the lows can get brutally low. And I have no desire to be in the middle.

amazing life. I've gotten to know a lot of great people, family, friends, and all of those things are so important. The thrill of my work is only surpassed by my home life."

TS | Do you have advice for young people who want to do the kind of work you are doing?

AB | Your discipline and your energy have to match your passion. And it's really about

versatility. I dance, sing. I act. I tap. I can do hip-hop now. And you have to be able to do all those things, because if you put all your eggs in one tiny little basket, then you're going to have very few opportunities. And I'm about a career; I'm not about a job. I'm about how can this translate into something that can sustain me and my family. If the dreams aren't big, then you're never going to sustain anything. I mean, the dreams have to be really, really big, and you have to be willing to go there, because it's a lot of work.

TS | And it doesn't get easier.

AB | It doesn't get easier. In fact, it gets remarkably harder, which was surprising to me. I have friends who have nine-to-five jobs or whatever. I get so resentful of them and the time that they get to spend with their families on the weekends. I get envious that they leave work on Friday—they're not trying to figure out eight counts or why the audience doesn't laugh at a particular bit. They leave work behind. But the peaks and valleys that I have—I mean, the peaks! Most people don't get the peaks that I get to have. The valleys can get really, really low, and I think that's what people need to prepare themselves for. The highs are higher than you can imagine, but the lows can get brutally low. And I have no desire to be in the middle. And so sometimes I'm going to crash, sometimes I'm going to fly, but that's the way it has to be. That's what makes really stunning art.

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