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## Apollo Theater stars born at Zellerbach

### Amateur Night road show stops in town to pick through a hundred hopefuls

By Joel Selvin

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Jessica Johnson, 14, went to bed early the night before her audition for the Apollo Theater Amateur Night on Tour last weekend. It was the night before that she stayed up late rehearsing her song.

An olive-skinned beauty in a splashy orange dress, she was going to sing "Orange Colored Sky," the old Nat King Cole swinger she used to win Miss Teen Ambassador 2001 in Los Angeles. Although she admitted to being a little nervous sitting backstage at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall on Saturday morning with her mother, she has sung in many competitions before.

She is a freshman at Lincoln Performing Arts High School in

**TIM GOODMAN'S**  
television column will return

#### THEATER

##### APOLLO THEATER AMATEUR

**NIGHT:** With hosts Talent and Capone, C.P. Lacey as "The Executioner" and Apollo house band Ray Chew & the Crew. 8 p.m. Jan. 31 at Zellerbach Hall, UC Berkeley. Tickets: \$20-\$40. Call (510) 642-9988 or [www.calperfs.berkeley.edu](http://www.calperfs.berkeley.edu).

San Jose and sings the national anthem at Sharks games and other sporting events. She has taken voice lessons since she was 5 years old and has studied with a vocal coach since she was 10. And, yes, Jessica Johnson wants to be in show business.

So do most of the the rest of the more than 100 amateurs and semi-amateurs who showed up for day-long auditions at the Berkeley campus, where producer Frances Brown was looking for the dozen or so acts that will appear Jan. 31 in "Amateur Night at the Apollo Theater on Tour" at Zellerbach.

Judley Lewis, 15, of Benicia prepared a version of the Whitney



DARRYL BUSH / The Chronicle

The New Faces perform at the Apollo Theater Amateur Night.

Houston song "Run to You" for her audition. She spoke for the emotions of a lot of the young contestants. "All my life," she said. "I've wanted to be a pop star."

Amateur Night at the Apollo has been a Harlem tradition since 30-year-old Ella Fitzgerald won the contest in 1934. With the landmark historic theater closed for renovation, the Wednesday-night

event has left the building for the first time on a 40-city cross-country tour. The audience at the Zellerbach show will select the winner of the \$1,000 top prize and trip to New York to play the real Apollo Amateur Night.

Contestants waiting for their two- to four-minute auditions

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# Amateurs jockey for the spotlight

► APOLLO

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tuddled first in the lobby, then backstage and finally on the side of the spacious stage. Producer Brown faced performers from behind a table on the lip of the stage, a wall of bottled water hiding her note taking, an assistant beside her videotaping each act. She was warm, cordial and direct, asking the occasional clarifying question and thanking each contestant; "You'll hear from us by phone in the next couple of days if you've been chosen."

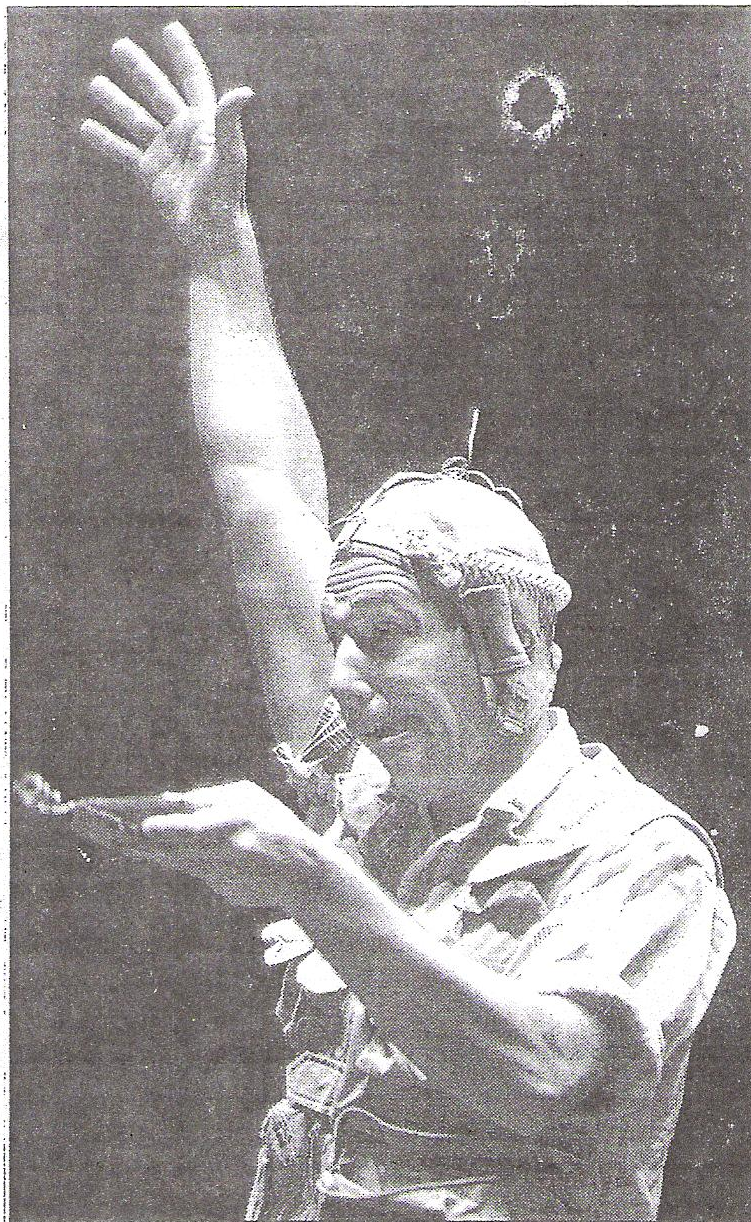
Throughout it all, Brown kept a deadpan game face that would have done a Supreme Court justice proud. Almost all the participants were singers, and about half sounded as if they wanted to be the next Mariah Carey. If she'd seen enough by two minutes, Brown would cut off the act, although mostly she sat patiently. One overwrought clown in face paint protested when she waved him off. "Don't I get my four minutes?" he pleaded.

At the break, Brown discussed one of the contestants, a young man named Yo Frank ("That's my real name," he said). Frank called his act "comedy a cappella," but what he did was some sort of bizarre interpretative dancing to an original pop-rock song, some of which acted out the lyrics and some of which was merely bizarre. He shouted along with occasional key phrases in the song and appeared intensely focused in his oblique coveit.

"I'm looking for that," said Brown, "people who are sure about what they're doing. He was trying to show me something. I didn't entirely get it, but he was confident. He knew what he was about, and he was getting down."

They flew through the auditions. It was all terribly earnest and wholesome. Halfway through the auditions, producer Brown, a six-year veteran of the Apollo, was confident she had a show. "From now on, it will have to be elimination," she said. "If I stopped now, we'd have a sweet show."

Jessica Johnson finally made it out to stage and handed her CD



Photos by DARRYL BUSH / The Chronicle



10 Jaron Hollander performs his clown act during auditions for the Apollo Theater Amateur Night on Jan. 21 at Zellerbach Auditorium. Left, contestant Brittany Harris belts out vocals.

to the sound technician. She announced her name (and audition number) clearly and struck a pose, waiting for her music to start, a million-dollar smile lighting her face. The big-band track crashed in behind her, and she went into her act, belting out the lyrics — "Crash! Bam! Alakazam!" — and strutting the stage like a Vegas showgirl. She ended with a big

finish, her hands spread triumphantly.

"Thank you very much for coming," producer Brown said. "You'll hear from us by phone in the next couple of days if you've been chosen."

E-mail Joel Selvin at [jselvin@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jselvin@sfchronicle.com).