

There are big personalities — and then there's Mary Murphy, who transmits force-of-nature energy even 3,000 miles away over a phone line. Between tapings of the eleventh season of Fox's smash hoof-off, *So You Think You Can Dance*, Murphy — who's held the middle seat on the show's three-judge panel for a decade — is effusive and buoyant, punctuating her comments with her trademarked laugh, a hybrid of a guffaw, a cackle and a full-throated roar.

Believe it or not, Murphy says of her laugh: "I contain it on the show." The lone daughter in an Irish Catholic family from Ohio, Murphy no doubt had to project to make herself heard over her four brothers. But she adds, "My mother had a very loud laugh — louder than mine, I think."

Her unfettered enthusiasm — reacting to the competition's wildly diverse performances with a double-barreled array of physical gestures and vocal abandon — has earned her the moniker "The Queen of Scream" and made her a household name. "At a Clippers game, the center turned to me, pumped his arm and went, 'Woo-hoo!'" she relates. "I couldn't believe it!"

But beyond her role as the panel's resident cheerleader, Murphy is also its chief nurturer and dispenser of tough love. Having competed for two decades as a ballroom dancer herself, she is finely attuned to the responsibility placed in her hands as a judge.

"You have to take care, because words are very powerful," she says, "Yes, a dancer's life is difficult. Yes, we have to take rejection time and time again. Yes, we have to be critiqued. But the manner in which you give that critique makes all the difference between somebody saying, 'I'm quitting,' or, 'I have a future in this.'"

And on the flip side, Murphy reflects, "To see some kid who has never been professionally trained move you to tears with a one-minute-thirty-second performance — there's something very special about that."

Also gratifying: *SYTYCD* has become something of a farm system for stage productions all over the country. "Everywhere I go, whether it's the Oscars or a Lady Gaga show, all of a sudden my eyes bug out and I'm like, 'Oh, my God! It's so-and-so!' They're getting some of the highest-paying jobs out there."

Beyond that, she continues, *SYTYCD* has been the best possible promoter of the art of dance itself. "I was always having to explain to people what I did for a living," she recalls of her days as a performer. "Then people would say, 'What else do you do?' Those days are over because of this show."

On that point, she's dead serious. —Mike Flaherty

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She Who Laughs Loudest

