

# Billy Elliot

After the novel *Billy Elliot* (written by Lee Hall) the movie has made heroes of boy ballet dancers. All those ballet classes make a man of you, discovers

**Cosmo Landesman**



**The** movie meant the arrival of a new and unlikely hero called Billy Elliot, whose only crime is that he is an 11-year-old boy who wants to do ballet. But to Billy's dad, a miner on strike during the turbulent year of 1984, there is only one thing more disgusting than a 'scab' who crosses a picket line (a strike breaker) and that is a son who wants to do a pirouette in public.

What are the realities of life for boys who do ballet? The actor who plays Billy, Jamie Bell, says that when he was eight he used to 'get hassle' from lads at school, who kept saying: "Jamie, you shouldn't be doing that, it's for girls." Bell's solution was simple: he would 13 dance classes after football practice.

Jane Devine, a former pupil and now press officer of the Royal Ballet Company, paints a pain-free picture of boys doing ballet at her school. "Attitudes have definitely changed," she says. "Fifty years ago it would have been very rare to find boys at the Royal Ballet. We

now have about 200 pupils and 67 of them are boys."

I spoke to two of them, Guy Fletcher, 17, from Israel, and Paul Kay, 16, from Newton Abbot in Devon. To my surprise, neither had ever faced much prejudice or disapproval. Paul, who began dancing at eight, said that when he first started dancing he was teased a bit, "but these days boys doing ballet is 14".

But then I talked to Gillian Quinn from Whitley Bay, in Tyne on Wear, who has been teaching ballet for 45 years and has plenty of painful tales. "I had a pupil from a nearby mining town, and his family were miners. I once saw him walking down the street. He dropped his bag and his ballet shoes fell out. I saw the panic on his face. He was terrified that someone would 15."

Yet how are we to explain the fact that more boys are taking up ballet? The answer is simple: ballet is losing its aura of unmanliness and acquiring a new gloss of athleticism. Every boy, man and teacher I talked to was anxious to point out the incredible physical challenge it poses. Ballet boys are on the whole not pale, sensitive types who prefer poetry to sport. Most of them are 16 who live and breathe football, rugby or gymnastics.

How, I wonder, in our age of laddism do young boys get interested in ballet in the first place? I discovered

that an entire generation of male dancers had emerged for one simple reason: they were dragged off by their parents to watch their sisters do ballet and 90% of them thought: 'I can do better than that.'

The film's success has already affected the life of one man I talked to. Simon Perry, 37, lives in Cardiff and works for the Inland Revenue. He was dragged off to do ballet at the age of six, but has kept this fact a secret from his friends and workmates for most of his life.

Now he has a new confidence. "We were discussing *Billy Elliot* this week and I admitted that I had done ballet," he said. "17 once upon a time I would have got stick, all of them now said, 'well done' and 'good on you'. They wonder how a 37-year-old lump like me could ever have got into a pair of tights. And so do I."

*Kies bij de open plekken in de tekst het juiste antwoord uit de gegeven mogelijkheden.*

1p 13

- A dream about
- B refuse to go to
- C sneak off to

1p 14

- A exceptional
- B no big deal
- C outdated
- D still not accepted

1p 15

- A find out his secret
- B pick them up
- C steal them from him
- D tell me about it

1p 16

- A dedicated sportsmen
- B feminine guys
- C former athletes
- D skilful coaches

1p 17

- A Just as
- B Since
- C While

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#### Bronvermelding

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