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## **ARTICLE NAME**

*Billy Elliot The Musical*: Visual representations of working-class masculinity and the all-singing, all-dancing bo[d]y.

## **AUTHOR NAME**

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## **ABSTRACT**

According to Cynthia Weber, '[d]ance is commonly thought of as liberating, transformative, empowering, transgressive, and even as dangerous'. Yet, ballet as a masculine activity, it still remains a suspect phenomenon. This paper will challenge this claim in relation to *Billy Elliot the Musical* and its critical reception. The transformation of the visual representation of the human body on stage (from an ephemeral existence to a timeless work of art) will be discussed and analysed vis-a-vis the text and sub-texts of Stephen Daldry's direction and Peter Darling's choreography. The dynamics of working-class masculinity will be contextualised within the framework of the family, the older female, the community, the self and the act of dancing itself.

## **KEYWORDS**

Billy Elliot, masculinity, male dancers, dancing musicals, representations of the male

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## **Introduction**

This paper examines the visual representations of working-class masculinity portrayed in Stephen Daldry's stage musical adaptation of the film *Billy Elliot* (2000). After a brief discussion of the portrayal of the male ballet dancer in the dancing scene since the 1990s and the inherent voyeuristic inclinations of contemporary audiences, the analysis will focus on five aspects of male presence in *Billy Elliot the Musical* (2005). The dynamics of working-class masculinity will be contextualised within the framework of the family, the older female, the community, the self and the act of dancing itself. These aspects will be referenced using reviews of the musical version of the work and articles written on the film of *Billy Elliot*. The discussion will suggest also that the all-singing, all-dancing bo[d]y is transformed on stage from an ephemeral phenomenon to an iconic symbol of its age. However, have today's audiences conditioned their gendered gaze to allow for the male ballet dancer to dominate the contemporary stage? Or do we still control our social perceptions and cultural associations with out-of-date images of the past? Have popular perceptions about the male ballet dancer changed? Is there a birth of a new male dancer phenomenon?

Even if nineteenth-century ballet became 'so concerned with the display of female bodies that male characters became almost an impossibility (or reduced to the kind of mime and choreographic support-work)' (Henson 2007: 5), the twentieth-century had its notable exceptions with the charismatic Vaslav Nijinsky, the legendary Rudolf Nureyev (on stage), the athletic Gene Kelly, the suave Fred Astaire and the magnetic John Travolta (on stage and screen). If we examine the dance scene since the 1990s, we would observe that the male ballet dancer has been re-invented in the

theatre canon.<sup>1</sup> Mathew Bourne is partly responsible for this new trend of presenting the male dancer on stage, with examples like his male *Swan Lake* (1995), which is also used at the end of the film version of *Billy Elliot* and *The Car Man* (2000), changing the popular assumptions that ballet as a masculine activity is a suspect phenomenon. And this proves the point that male ballet is a much more complex activity than just that. Companies like DV8 and Lloyd Newson have blurred the boundaries between the classical male ballet dancer and the ‘new’ male dancer with works such as *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* (1989) and *Enter Achilles* (1995). These works erotised, and homo-erotised the male body giving it a new political status. Michael Clark and Wim Vandekeybus re-negotiated masculinity and its positioning within the canon while other choreographers such as Javier de Frutos<sup>2</sup> have liberated the male body by exposing the dancers and himself with naked displays of unrestrained emotion.

The androgynous male ballet dancer has been replaced by strong muscular gymnasts who treat contemporary dance as a new form of sport and who are more than happy to display their muscles to their audiences. Spectacular shows by *Cirque du Soleil* and new musical extravaganzas such as *Stomp*, *Tap Dogs* and *Riverdance* have re-defined the presence of the male on stage. The stereotypical expectations of ballet (for example, the female body being the normal object of spectator’s desire) have now been reversed. Carlos Acosta of the Royal Ballet features solo in as many

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<sup>1</sup> The scope of this study does not allow us to have a more extensive overview. On the other hand, there is a dearth of academic writing on the male dancer. Notable exceptions are Ramsay Burt’s *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities* (1996) and Michael Gard’s *Men Who Dance: Aesthetics, Athletics & the Art of Masculinity* (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Award-winning choreographer Javier de Frutos (born in Venezuela in 1963) is currently the Artistic Director of Phoenix Dance Theatre. His recent work includes choreography for the musicals *Cabaret* (West End) and *Carousel* (Chichester).

posters as his fellow ballerinas, while the sensual Joaquin Cortes continues to perform in sell-out houses all over the world.<sup>3</sup>

Popular perceptions and attitudes like ‘real boys don’t go to dance classes’, (Gard 2001: 213) are beginning to disappear. More boys are now dancing and through their dance they have managed to uplift the anti-male dancer taboos. Henson writes that Billy Elliot’s dance shows his ‘transformation from boy to man, the struggle to achieve and the liberating power of artistic expression ... [it] also communicate[s] a powerful view of male balletic dancing, a form of male performance prone to stereotype and misunderstanding. Billy is no “sissy”... he is an innovator, an achiever, a sportsman’ (Henson 2007: 1).

But how do the audiences react to changes in visual representations of masculinity? The voyeuristic tendencies of recent audiences, (apparent in audience behaviours towards so-called reality television, see *Big Brother* phenomenon) together with a desire to come into closer, more direct contact with the dancer’s flesh, have created new forms of performance, whether site-specific, or even one-to-one encounters. The body physicality of the ‘new’ male dancer signifies strength and physical presence which might have been associated with working-class ethics and manual labour in the past. Images of males dancing are being released from their homoerotic associations and invite new semiotic readings. Karen Henson notes on the audience-performer relationship: the audience now ‘consumes with delight but distance, nuance but also desire and pleasure’ (Henson 2007: 9).

Since the late 1990s, masculinity<sup>4</sup> started emerging as a major subject in academic discussions, works of art and stage productions. This revolution was also

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<sup>3</sup> The best selling and most discussed show during the 2006-7 theatrical season in Athens (Greece) was Demetris Papaioannou’s 2, a dance theatre extravaganza featuring 22 males.

<sup>4</sup> This paper will not attempt to present the ‘bo[d]y and masculinity’ within a gender or sexuality framework. This has been explored by Mangan in *Staging Masculinities: History, Gender,*

felt in films such as *Brassed Off* (1996) and *The Full Monty* (1997) which dealt with the alienation of the Northern male from his traditional habitat – the working men’s club and the brass band – and looked at life from a male perspective. The management of male energy (either by playing in bands or through stripping in the respective films mentioned above) is fully explored in *Billy Elliot the Musical* through aggressive dance sequences and moments of explosive percussive rigour.

*Billy Elliot the Musical* has enjoyed positive critical acclaim including Charles Spencer’s verdict that it is ‘the greatest musical yet’, a work where ‘there is rawness, a warm humour and a sheer humanity... that is worlds removed from the soulless slickness of most musicals’ (Spencer *The Daily Telegraph* 12 May 2005). The show portrays a masculine crisis in a coal mining village in England in 1986 and explores family relationships in a most intricate and personal way. In that respect, dance comes into direct opposition with the working-class practices of the males of the mining community: it is ridiculed and equated with homosexuality. Cynthia Weber, however, insists that ‘even though it might popularly be read otherwise, ballet [and in our case dance] is not necessarily a queer space for men... Billy thinks of dance as a male and masculine space’ (Weber 2003). This paper will apply Weber’s claim and use the musical version of *Billy Elliot* as its main case study for its findings.

### **Solidarity (of the community) and the male individual: brothers fighting**

[T]he musical... counterpoints Billy’s personal triumph against the community’s decline.

(Billington *The Guardian* 12 May 2005)

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*Performance* (2003), Shilling in *The Body and Social Theory* (2003), Turner in *The Body and Society* (1996), Petersen in *Unmasking the Masculine: ‘Men’ and ‘Identity’ in a Sceptical Age* (1998), Watson in *Male bodies: health, culture and identity* (2000), Lehman in *Running Scared: Masculinity and the*

Billy Elliot, a miner's son, is found amidst the confusion of daily struggles which involve the miners standing restlessly on picket lines at the colliery gates. The fighting tends to break out when the police attempt to escort strike breaking miners into the pit. This is also a reflection of Billy's home working-class environment where his brother (also a miner) is fighting with his father on issues directly related to the strike. One of the main differences of the film version of *Billy Elliot* and its stage transfer is that in the latter there is more opportunity to indulge in moments of striking beauty where issues of class and conflict are explored through Peter Darling's choreography<sup>5</sup> and Elton John's music. Benedict Nightingale comments that

we get dances of police and miners that start in Keystone style but get more menacing with the introduction of batons and clubs, and end with a stupendous number in which the cops become a terrifying wall of riot shields against which Billy flutters and bangs like a distracted moth.

(Billington *The Times* 12 May 2005)

The stage becomes a platform to explore one of the main issues of Thatcherite Britain: the complete disempowerment of the workers' unions. The workers sing the song 'Solidarity' that reflects the traditional socialist chant 'The workers united shall never be defeated' – the fabled 'unity is strength' slogan of the trade union tradition:

Solidarity, solidarity

Solidarity for ever

All for one and one for all

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*Representation of the Male Body* (1993), Middleton in *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity & Subjectivity in Modern Culture* (1992), *Men, Masculinity, and the Media* (1992) edited by Craig and others.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Darling's choreography credits include the musicals: *The Lord of the Rings*, *Our House*, *Closer to Heaven*, *Merrily We Roll Along*, *Candide* and *Oh! What a Lovely War*.

We are proud to be working class.

(‘Solidarity’, *Billy Elliot the Musical*)



*Figure 1: Billy Elliot dancing. Photo: David Scheinmann*

The *status quo*, that Billy is trying to overturn, clashes with his desire to dance. This locks him out of the ‘macho’ male world of the miners and makes him different from the rest of the males. Billy wants to break out of this solidarity and hopes for the day when he will ‘fly away’ and even if this will make him an outcast, he will find a better tomorrow away from the ‘stifling confines of the enclosed and embattled community’ (Kink 2002).

The binary of the community and the individual gains a new dimension which becomes confronted with an element of competition amongst the males of that



working-class community. Billy and his brother are fighting for two different ideals: personal individuality and solidarity. Billy wants to break free, his brother fights to maintain the male traditions of colliery workers. Lancioni notes that ‘the frustration and hopelessness of the striking coal miners of Durham County, England, are certainly real enough. A postindustrialized society is draining them of hope and self-respect’ (Lancioni 2006: 726). This is felt rather explicitly with the failed strike actions of the workers and the gloomy fact that they are fighting an already lost battle. In the first song ‘The Stars Look Down’, there is a sense of a hymn, fighting the good fight against the forces of darkness. Lee Hall’s lyrics reflect this:

And although your feet are weary  
And although your soul is worn  
And although they’ll try to break you  
And although you’ll feel alone  
We will always stand together  
In the dark, right through the storm  
We will stand, shoulder to shoulder  
To keep us warm.

(‘The Stars Look Down’, *Billy Elliot the Musical*)

The militaristic togetherness, with its possible homoerotic undertones, is also representative of the communities represented in Elia Kazan’s film *On the Waterfront* (1954). Terry Malloy’s fight against the system, the corruption of the mafia, his determination to change the *status quo* and his insistent refusal to conform has clear parallels with *Billy Elliot*. Also, the relationship of the two brothers in *On the Waterfront* reflects, in a way, the narrative of *Billy Elliot*. Boxing is a prominent feature in both stories: in *On the Waterfront* Terry Malloy enjoyed a brief, yet

successful career as a boxer which was terminated after the interference of his brother who 'sold' the boxing match for money. This is evident from this classic exchange from the film:

**Charlie:** Look, kid, I – how much you weigh, son? When you weighed one hundred and sixty-eight pounds you were beautiful. You coulda been another Billy Conn, and that skunk we got you for a manager, he brought you along too fast.

**Terry:** It wasn't him, Charley, it was you. Remember that night in the Garden you came down to my dressing room and you said, 'Kid, this ain't your night. We're going for the price on Wilson.' You remember that? 'This ain't your night'! My night! I coulda taken Wilson apart! So what happens? He gets the title shot outdoors on the ballpark and what do I get? A one-way ticket to Palooka-ville! You was my brother, Charley, you shoulda looked out for me a little bit. You shoulda taken care of me just a little bit so I wouldn't have to take them dives for the short-end money.

**Charlie:** Oh I had some bets down for you. You saw some money.

**Terry:** You don't understand. I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am, let's face it. It was you, Charley.

*(On the Waterfront)*

In *Billy Elliot*, this is reversed (and pays homage to Kazan' film) by the insistence of Billy's brother (and father) to take up boxing in his spare time and banning him from going to ballet classes. The strong masculine activity of boxing, which could potentially double as a self-defence exercise for young Billy, is one of the more accepted forms of recreation for young males, even in today's working-class societies. Muir reports that,

Though boxing has many detractors, who say it is dangerous and allows aggressive young men to display their tendencies to more devastating effect ... David Blunkett ... [t]he home secretary said ‘The discipline of amateur boxing training can give young people the chance to keep fit, learn sportsmanship and self-discipline and benefit from the support of a mentor in their boxing coach. It can also offer positive routes into training, education and employment, as many young people who are beginning to master the sport are finding ... Amateur boxing is an activity that more and more young people from deprived neighbourhoods are choosing to become involved in. While it may not have the associated glamour of some other sports it gives young people status and an opportunity to make something of their lives – and how can that be a bad thing?’

(Muir *The Guardian* 27 September 2004)

Boxing requires focused energy and constant alertness. But, so does dance. Billy sees dancing ‘just like sport’ and not ‘prancing about like a fruit’. In this way, he is also trying to convince the members of his family (and his community) that dance is indeed a valid and acceptable activity. And by doing this, he celebrates his individuality by having secret dance classes and keeps his promise to his dead mother’s request to ‘always be’ himself. James Leggott reminds us that,

[i]nitially sceptical, Billy’s father is eventually persuaded of his son’s talent, no doubt intuiting how Billy is involved in the formation of a new model of new athleticism. As such, Billy’s achievement is at once a subversion of patriarchal expectation, and also a project of reclamation of his father’s behalf, a mission to devise a viable new expression of masculinity.

(Powrie 2004: 171)

Despite all of the community's financial difficulties, when the fellow miners finally, and reluctantly, decide to help fund Billy's audition, there is a demonstration of the more sensitive facet of the Northern masculinity. In a discussion with a 22-year old audience member, Christopher Cook observes that the action of giving their money can be seen as,

a small personal sacrifice of their own masculinity. A link is formed between the identity, the strike and thereby their income, and their sense of community. When the 'scab' tried to fund Billy's ticket, he becomes a representation of the strike, particularly to Billy's brother. He doesn't allow the money to be used at first and I sensed this was partly because he needed the sacrifice they had all made to be acknowledged and not overshadowed, like everything else in their lives, by the higher power. The cause of their inability to fund Billy in the first place is the strike, so by sacrificing a portion of their masculinity (which makes up a huge portion of their identity as working-class males), Billy's brother would not allow the sacrifice to be in vain.<sup>6</sup>

Billy chooses to free himself from the solidarity and ordinariness of his working-class male surroundings and find refuge in the ballet classes. Even if dance involves pain, emotional and physical strain, he challenges the conventionality of his own masculinity by self-improvement. His efforts are focused on getting the dance right. Alan Sinfield comments, on the other hand, on Billy's escape saying that '[t]here is no prospect here of transforming the system. The struggle is to maintain it! Solidarity is important for consolation and respect. Billy Elliot escapes, largely because the system is already permeable' (Sinfield 2006: 169).

### **The absent mother and the female teacher: dance as conversation**

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<sup>6</sup> This was a testimony from a Music Theatre postgraduate student by e-mail correspondence to the author.

The emotion always seems real and spontaneous, rather than cunningly manipulated to pull at the heartstrings. And there is anger as well as joy, bitter resentment as well as compassion, above all a sense of nagging grief. That grief is both personal and political. Young Billy Elliot is in mourning for his mother, who died two years before the show begins, haunted by her memory, and trapped in an oppressively masculine world that allows few displays of tenderness and affection.

(Spencer *The Daily Telegraph* 12 May 2005)

Having examined Billy's relationship with the other males of the family and their solidarity within the community, we will look at his relationship with the three older females of his life: the dance teacher Mrs Wilkinson (as mother-replacement), the absent mother and his grandmother.<sup>7</sup> After the death of Billy's mother, the only female in his family is the 'wandering' grandmother, until he meets the dance teacher Mrs Wilkinson. This dramaturgical device allows for the show's emotional qualities to be presented in an intimate way. What is significant here is that Billy has plenty of male role models in his family. The absent mother, though, allows the possibility of a special relationship with the dance teacher who is female.

The male-to-male boxing lesson tradition is replaced with Mrs Wilkinson who is also a mother-replacement figure. In this way, Billy can be more open about his feelings than he would otherwise be with a male teacher (or even his boxing instructor). Billy is also very direct and painfully harsh with her at times, proving that he has not had any experience in talking to females in a sensitive or tactful way. However, the dance teacher is the one who encourages him to develop his talent in

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<sup>7</sup> The relationship with Mrs Wilkinson's daughter (and the other younger females) will not be analysed here since it creates new possibilities and comments further on Billy's sexuality which could be a new chapter for discussion.

dance, however bizarre that sounds in the context of the society in which they live, and she is the one that has to face the oppositions of Billy's father and brother.



*Figure 2: Mrs Wilkinson dancing. Photo: David Scheinmann*

This involvement with Billy's strongly patriarchal family environment elevates her relationship with Billy, from a Platonic one, to a closer, family one. That reversal of roles creates a strong dynamic between the two and thus, allows for a powerful female to qualify as a quasi-male equivalent within the community.

In Daldry's direction, the absent mother is represented through the letter that she left for Billy before she died. The letter, and consequently the song written for it (which is firstly sung by Billy, then by Mrs Wilkinson and then as a duet between Mrs Wilkinson and the dead mother), creates a very moving encounter between Billy and his dance teacher. There are brief appearances of the mother figure from the 'kitchen door' and these illusionary moments for Billy become even more difficult for the audience when the mother figure disappears and in its place we just have a slightly shuffled curtain. Again, through the absent mother's letter and her advice to 'always be yourself', we witness Billy getting inspiration for his dance and through his dance he converses with both the spirit of his *absent* mother and the guiding *present* Mrs Wilkinson.

The third female presence in Billy's life, his grandmother, is mostly used for comic effect and as a living reminder that men actually used to 'go dancing' in the 'old days'. She repeatedly states that she loved dancing and keeps reminiscing about her dancing escapades with Billy's grandfather that provided them with a sense of freedom: 'we were free... from the people we had to be'. This functions as a connecting thread to Billy's desire to dance and links dance to personal freedom, but the grandmother is not in a mental state to develop or promote Billy's talent. The absent mother, the mother replacement and the grandmother are all three inter-linked with dance: through Billy's desire to dance, he converses with the female. According to Kirk, 'amid the aggression, there is also a kind of *muteness* about this culture, it is inert: Billy's father seems unable to express emotions that are clearly damaging him, the grandmother has trouble putting together a single, coherent sentence and Billy's brother tends to resort to angry, helpless tirades or demands for silence from his

brother' (Kirk 2002). Dance becomes a catalyst for that conversation to take place and compensates for the harshness and muteness of his relationships with his family.

### **Dancing instead of ...boxing: masculinity games in the working-class boxing club**

Choreographers are aware of the convention that, in order to represent masculinity, a dancer should look powerful... being 'extremely aggressive' is a way of reimposing control and thus evading objectification.

(Burt 1995: 51)

The third aspect to be discussed is Billy's experience in the working-class masculine space of the boxing club. Traditionally, that space is used for the homosocial activity of sport, but Billy re-invents that to practise his dance moves. Billy makes a conscious and difficult decision to abandon his boxing lesson and take ballet classes instead. Like sport, dance requires self-discipline, strength and control which are characteristics of a good sportsman. Hill observes that the boxing club is used as 'an aid to male bonding [and] is counterposed to the hitherto all-feminine world of the ballet class to which Billy becomes ineluctably drawn' (Powrie 2004: 104), but 'there is little of its emphasis upon the reconstruction of the traditional homosocial community as the means to the recovery of male self-respect' (Powrie 2004: 108).

But how can ballet dance be viewed as a muscular, masculine and athletic activity? Can the male ballet dancer be associated with Artaud's notion of a 'heart athlete' (Artaud 1999: 100)?<sup>8</sup> The 'new' male dancer refuses to be associated with the accusations of dance as an un-masculine activity and uses the aggressive element

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<sup>8</sup> In Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*, he suggests that 'an actor is like a physical athlete, with this astonishing corollary; his affective organism is similar to the athlete's, being parallel to it like a double, although they do not act on the same level. The actor is a heart athlete' (Artaud 1999: 100).



to affirm his power. And thus, the reality comes into direct conflict with fantasies of escapism from County Durham's grey setting. Kirk argues that,

sport, a traditional escape route for the working-class kid, is replaced by 'art': low culture substituted by high, and yet there is a definite sense that ... [the work] sets out to deconstruct this binary, as it sets out, too, to problematise ideas about masculinity and the 'male norm'.

(Kirk 2002)

What is more, the presence of Michael (the effeminate best friend who cross-dresses and wears tutus) as the only other male youngster, helps create a binary opposition between the two boys. Audience member Christopher Cook notes that,

Michael provides (more than anything) the humour that allows an audience to relax into the idea of change, but shares a fate not too dissimilar to that of the miners. Whereas Billy's golden future is laid before him in a parallel to that of the miners' bleak one, I feel it is also one shared by Michael - whose masculinity is explosively controversial. He is partly responsible for Billy's liberation and his ability to understand his mother's message of 'Always be yourself', but is left behind shedding floods of tears ... but the real issues are presented in Michael; not the boy who wanted to dance, but the one who wanted to dress up. How much change in perception would it require an audience to view Michael, as a Billy? Not a comedic Dame who earns laughs for wearing a dress - but a raw, pure expression of self: the true beauty of *Billy Elliot*.

The director Daldry and choreographer Darling are fully aware of the semiotic of this reading and they take full advantage of this binary opposition in the show-stopper number 'Expressing Yourself' in Act One. Darling juxtaposes Billy and Michael in a comic scene of cross-dressing. When this is repeated in Act Two and displaced from the Michael's bedroom to the boxing club, the two boys' activities are watched by their not-too-happy fathers. This dramaturgical device leads to a climactic moment of

conflict where issues of sexuality inevitably need to be clarified between the boys and their fathers.

However, for the rest of the show, Billy's solo dance choreography involves more than formally studied ballet steps and incorporates everyday moves from his private movement vocabulary. Billy's anger and frustration create explosive solos which represent his inner desire for self-expression and challenges any accusations of being effeminated through dance. Maybe the replacement of boxing with dancing could have become a homosocial activity, if only his fellow dancers were ... heterosexual boys.

Daldry reports that his approach wanted to portray '[d]ance as action rather than as aesthetics; dance as conversation rather than as abstract; the kid expressing himself rather than the brilliance of the finished product' (Daldry 2000: 12). In the case of Billy, even though the boxing ring option is abandoned, Darling's choreography still manages to keep an edgy and raw energy which is linked to a stereotypical athlete, rather than a traditional male ballet dancer. Henson claims that in the film version of *Billy Elliot*, 'Daldry and Bell communicate their sportsmanlike view of ballet' (Henson: 2007: 8). The stage version of *Billy Elliot* also sustains the elements of athleticism and sportsmanship in its choreography.<sup>9</sup> Daldry's *mise-en-scene* and its visual representations of masculinity has another direct link with Burt's observations that,

the ways in which the male dancer's presence succeeds or fails in reinforcing male power is clearly central to an understanding of representations of masculinity in theatre dance. How spectators read dancers' presence is determined by visual cues.

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<sup>9</sup> Gard comments on a not dissimilar work, Magorian and Ormerod's picture book *Jump* (1992) that 'the implied and taken-for granted heterosexuality of male sport is reinforced ... a boy can be both a sportsperson and a dancer, the reliance on this dichotomised view of physical movement simply reiterates that they embody dichotomised sexual meanings for many people' (Gard 2001: 217).

Some of these cues are given by the dancers, through the way they present themselves to the audience, and in the way they themselves focus their gaze.

(Burt 1995: 51)

In the dance sequence where Billy is dancing against the police in the closing sequence of Act One, the tap movement is amplified to serve as percussive musical sound which is dominant and empowering for Billy. He is using movement to release his anger. Darling's choreography is full of pain and the representation of Billy's anger, highlighted with the blue and red lighting of Daldry's *mise-en-scene* (a Union Jack reference) and the smoke, symbolising Billy's own revolution against the system and his personal clash against society and its norms. It is a male-to-male battle and it ends the first half with an outstanding exhibition of power and conviction.



*Figure 3: Billy Elliot dancing against the police. Photo: David Scheinmann*

This clash of masculinities suggests a strong conflict which releases male energy and proves Cynthia Weber's point that 'dance is commonly thought of as liberating, transformative, empowering, transgressive, and even as dangerous' (Weber 2003). The games of masculinity, both within and outside the working-class boxing club, aim for a personal and communal freedom: the freedom which will enable the men of this working-class community to express themselves through their profession, expertise and skill.

### **The Freedom of the dancing male: the 'flying' kid expressing himself**

This socialist musical becomes a lyrical celebration of self-expression set against, and deriving from, multiple expressions of grief: grief for Billy's dead mother, and for the strike's failure.

(Macaulay *The Financial Times* 13 May 2005)

To reach his own personal freedom and deal with the grey surroundings of his working-class living environment, Billy has to accept and also justify to his family that dance is an alternative and a valid replacement for sport<sup>10</sup> (and the abandoned boxing lessons). Gard believes that 'the process of defining male rejection of dance as a "problem" for boys is indicative of a wider tendency to see the projection and cultivation of hegemonic masculine norms of behaviour as paramount' (Gard 2001: 214). This is partly one of the reasons why the dramatic tensions of *Billy Elliot* work on a purely psychological level: Billy's actions have consequences which are related not only to the immediate family, but also the community's attitudes towards dance.

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<sup>10</sup> BBC Health website supports this view by claiming that 'dance classes could be a good way to tackle childhood obesity ... creative dance should be considered as an alternative to sport for children'. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/6470815.stm> Accessed 21 March 2007.

Gard continues by relating this attitude to dance as sport, but rejects the suggestion that,

any particular codified dance form ... provides access to, or expression of, universal human needs or desires ... as a means for developing, composing, sequencing and evaluating movement skills, there is no clear-cut reason why one might not use dance as the medium of instruction instead of gymnastics, tennis, or, for that matter, football.

(Gard 2001: 221)

I would disagree with part of his suggestion, because dance does provide a physicalised expression of emotions and personal desires and could lead to a personal self-transformation. If the main virtue of sport is the release of energy in a 'healthy' competitive environment, then dance is enhancing this activity by its ability to do the above and also provide the liberating excitement of personal creative expression.

The 'paradox' of a male ballet dancer raises questions of sexuality which cannot really be ignored in a small mining community. Gard believes that 'some dance forms offer a unique setting for explicitly addressing sexist and homophobic norms of bodily practice' (Gard 2001: 221). These diverse understandings of dance and the popular perceptions of the social construct of 'working-class masculinity' give the impression that there is still work to be done for male ballet dancers to be fully accepted as a non-suspect activity.

Billy's journey to freedom through self-expression could have a plethora of interlinked readings (the escape, rebirth, rags to riches, from shadow to light etc)<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> There are other ways that this journey has been interpreted and it would be worthwhile to include another reading of *Billy Elliot*'s narrative of escapism here. Thomas Kerkhoven's reads *Billy Elliot* in *Shiva on the Durham Coalfield: On the Pertinence of Hindu Myth to the film Billy Elliot* as a coming of age story:

Lee Hall's script under Daldry's direction portrays Billy's developing personality in particularly vivid imagery from fairy tales and biblical stories, and even more, from Hindu mythology. This mythology is brought to bear on Billy's coming of age by a creative magical realism. In fact, this psychological drama presents the passage of youth by a clever adaptation of a cycle of intricate Saiva (pertaining to the god

but Judith Lancioni chooses to read *Billy Elliot* as the fairytale of Cinderella. Lancioni maintains that there is a clear transformation here,

Billy Elliot is Cinderella because, through the intervention of a chain-smoking fairy godmother, he is transformed from a gangly working-class kid, destined for the coal mines to a mature, self-assured ballet star. Instead of boxing gloves or a glass slipper, he dons ballet shoes, and in doing so he transforms not only himself, but his family's and his community's concept of masculinity as well.

(Lancioni 2006: 710)

The journey for Billy is one of self-improvement and freedom. Dance is the medium for self-expression and change, where 'adolescent energy is transformed into athleticism' (Henson 2007:1) and during that process, self-discovery is achieved. It would be helpful to note Sue Palmer's insistence that

males are still born with the genetic encoding of Stone Age hunters. As they grow their bodies yearn to rehearse this masculine role: they need to run across fields, clamber through the undergrowth, fashion tools and weapons, push boundaries, take risks. If they don't fulfil these needs, they are likely to suffer in terms of development: physically, emotionally, socially, cognitively.

(Palmer *The Sunday Times* 18 November 2007)

It is evident that Lee Hall's lyrics demonstrate this desire for using dance as symbol of escapism and personal development: pushing one's existing boundaries and linking it to the idea of 'flying' freely 'like a bird' (creating possible links to the ballet *Swan Lake*).

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Shiva) Hindu myths transplanted to modern day England... Billy stands in the semblance of the god Shiva, supreme ascetic and master of eroticism, who appears in certain puranas (medieval tales) as 'boy by illusion' or 'young beggar, of perfect beauty' rather than as mature immortal. Shiva's developing relation to the goddess Parvati (Michael) and Billy's performance of Shiva's Tandava dance of regenerative destruction then provide an uncanny portrayal of Billy's coming of age. (Kerkhoven 2003)

The motif of ‘flying’ is firstly introduced in the only dream sequence of the show (just before the end of the First Act). Dream sequences (either as flash-backs or flash-forwards) interrupt the action and give as a ‘what-if’/alternative scenario in the form of a fantasy-based vision. In our case, Billy is presented dancing under the guidance of an ‘older self’ figure. In this sequence, the Platonic tutoring support he receives is changed from the female tutor (Mrs Wilkinson) to a male older self (brother-like) figure. The athletic–gymnastic imagery (with the use of the aerial rope work) is combined with finer subtler balletic moves and music from Tchaikovsky’s ballet *Swan Lake*. The older dancer could also be said to double up as Billy’s guardian angel (who is more experienced in ‘flying’) and new mentor. His aerial exploits (just like the other flying boy of the theatre – Peter Pan) focus the attention of the audience on Billy and not his surroundings. The action of ‘flying’ stresses his desire to move on to a new, more culturally vibrant environment and is possibly visually one of the few ‘brighter’ moments of the show. Billy is not avoiding manhood and the responsibilities of adulthood here: he is simply escaping and transforming his predestined fate.

The freedom of ‘flying’ and its association with dancing is developed even further during Billy’s audition at the Royal Ballet School (in Act Two). When he is asked by a member of the interviewing panel ‘What does it feel like when you are dancing?’ And Billy aptly responds:

It’s a feeling that you can’t control

I suppose it’s like forgetting, losing who you are

And at the same time something that makes you whole...

And then I feel a change

Like a fire deep inside

Something bursting me wide open impossible to hide  
And suddenly I'm flying, flying like a bird  
Like electricity, electricity  
Sparks inside of me  
And I'm free, I'm free.

(‘Electricity’, *Billy Elliot the Musical*)

Up to that point, Billy was singing what it meant to him to dance. But, suddenly he breaks into a spontaneous, improvised, self-expressive dance sequence. When words and music are not enough, then the movement is there to explicate inner desires. Darling’s choreography (which is appropriated and adjusted to the different strengths of each Billy) has an acrobatic edge to it and makes it a muscular and dangerous activity. It is full of anger and quasi martial-arts qualities and expresses Billy’s restlessness and affinity with dance. And at the end of it, he continues with the song concluding that dance is indeed like electricity: the force that leads him to freedom. And this relates directly to my understanding of the concept of ‘The British Dream’,<sup>12</sup> a term which needs urgently a definition. ‘The British dream’ – in this case the desire to do better than one’s own parents, the forbidden desire to dream and the action of dreaming – is now finally permitted.

### **Tension(s) and Release: dance as action**

We are capable of making lives for ourselves which are full of joy and self-expression... We owe it to the next generation to create a world where it is possible for the Billy Elliots as yet unborn to have a chance to succeed and flourish rather than

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<sup>12</sup> Boris Johnson writes that ‘Americans all understand instinctively that they are equal citizens of the greatest country on earth, and they all have an equal chance of rising to the top of that country. That is the idea of America, the American dream; and we have been comparatively hopeless at communicating any sense for the British dream, or the British idea’ (Johnson *The Daily Telegraph* 4 August 2005).



to be fed to the machine which grinds us into identical pieces only fit for consumption. If Billy Elliot conveys any message at all I hope it is that it is possible to fight back and resist and it is possible to move on without forgetting where you come from.

(Hall 2005: 3)

In order to complete our discussion, we need to address the issue of dance as an act of intervention. In what ways can dance act as a medium for transformative change? The whole publicity around *Billy Elliot the Musical* and the ‘Billy Elliot Academy’ in Leeds (where the young performers are trained so that they may fulfil their dreams and perform on the West End stage) has created a new genre that could be possibly described as the ‘athletic musical’: a new genre which allows for the athletic body to be celebrated, admired and looked at purely for its strength, muscular energy and beauty.

The all-singing, all-dancing bodies, have always been a source for huge financial gains for the show business producers and it is important that some of these gains are now being put back for developing, forming and training those young bodies in a gymnast-like academy. ‘It costs thousands to train a new Billy Elliot – and there’s no guarantee they’ll get the part in the end ... [because] puberty is enemy number one’ (John *The Guardian* 10 May 2006). There are, of course, many psychological dangers involved and other day-to-day difficulties, but the reality is that a boy playing Billy is on a ‘six-month contract; as well as performing two or three times a week he has to spend some nights at the theatre as cover for whoever is on stage’ (John *The Guardian* 10 May 2006). But still, the young performers in *Billy Elliot the Musical* would have experienced what most of us will never do, the opportunity to expose their talent in front of sold-out houses night after night. And that requires both tension(s) and release and the discipline of any athletic sport. The young Billy,

through his dancing, has also managed to change the popular public perception which claims that ‘real boys don’t go to ballet classes’ (Gard 2001: 213) to ‘only real boys can dance like this’!

In *Billy Elliot the Musical*, the closing imagery of the miners going down the pit pays tribute to the closing imagery of the Elia Kazan’s *On the Waterfront* where Marlon Brando’s Terry Malloy assumes control of the docks. That personal success, the end of that struggle is linked with Billy’s entry to the Royal Ballet School and the positive connotations of that achievement. And while the miners are singing,

So we walk proudly  
And we walk strong  
All together  
We will go as one  
The ground is empty  
And cold as hell  
But we all go together as we go.

(‘Once We Were Kings’, *Billy Elliot the Musical*)

Billy leaves his village for London. This powerful moment gives us a visual representation of the double edge of masculinity. The working-class males with their strong muscular bodies earning their ‘daily bread’ by working closely together in difficult situations, and a young male leaving all of this behind to go and pursue a different kind of future: one where physical strength is desired and valued, but in an aesthetic way. While the miners ‘all go together’ to the ground which is ‘cold as hell’, Billy with his luggage leaves through the £60 per-seat ticket, middle-class audience of the stalls. This reverses the dynamic opening of the show, where solidarity and a collectiveness of masculine energy were viewed as the norm. Billy’s transformation is

now complete, empowering and transgressive. Dance with all its tension(s) has now released a forward-looking momentum which acted as a catalyst for the change in Billy's (and, in some respects, the community's) perceptions and understanding of reality.

## **Conclusion**

The young male *enfant-terribles* in *Billy Elliot the Musical* break the conventional gender roles of representing the bo[d]y on stage, upsetting the existing tradition of females performing the younger male roles. The audience's curiosity and amazement with the young talent, the new 'younger' audiences who flock to the Victoria Palace Theatre (and soon other theatres in Australia and USA) remind us that there is a need to re-evaluate what we could/would like to expect from a night out at the theatre.

The athletic fireworks, the references to the circus and the inherent sadness linked to watching gymnasts perform (see performing monkeys), the obsessive attention to accuracy are all closely linked to the ritualistic invocations of an all-singing, all-dancing bo[d]y. And it is at this point that we can talk about the body, not as an ephemeral object of manual labour and strength, but as a timeless work of art: movements of arms and legs that will live for ever in the audience's imagination. Bodies which will be admired and looked at, freely, on stage, even if what they are doing is not widely regarded as valuable as the practical physical action of manual labour (and in our case, mining).

Theatre is the space where this transformation is made possible by uniting the body *performing* on stage with the body *watching* from the stalls. Visual representations are the decisive pointers which, through the semiotics of the *mise-en-scene*, allow the audience to apply their own mapping and understanding of the work's text and sub-texts and relate them to their own reality. *Billy Elliot the Musical*

and its creative team managed to re-define the British musical theatrical scene and its insistent lack of new British work and to celebrate 'the British Dream' through the all-singing, all-dancing bo[d]y, raising the bo[d]y's status to one of a role model for the future generations.

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