

Flight Training: Building an Army of Billy Elliots



Sally Ryan for The New York Times

Cesar Corrales, a star of the Chicago production of "Billy Elliot."

By MATTHEW GUREWITSCH
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A BOY in a tutu. This was the image Lee Hall saw in his mind's eye when he began the original screenplay for "Billy Elliot," the tale of a striking coal miner's son who crashes the gates of the [Royal Ballet School](#) in London. "We thought it would be impossible to find one kid for the movie," Mr. Hall said on a recent visit to New York. "Doing the show live, with singing, is so much harder."

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Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

The dance instructor Finis Jhung puts prospective Billys (including Joseph Harrington, center, who made the cut) through their paces in New York.

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seeing the show for the first time, "Billy is way beyond Annie."

Mr. Daldry and his colleagues go to great lengths to make the experience a rewarding one for everyone who tries out, but the process is Darwinian. Nora Brennan, the children's casting director for "Billy Elliot" in North America, has seen more than 2,000 boys since 2006. Only a dozen of those have made it into the show.

She is constantly on the lookout for 9- to 12-year-olds, no taller than 4 foot 10, with unbroken voices and a fire in the belly for dancing. Auditions, in person and on video (via the Web site [BeBilly.com](#)), never stop. "It's like prospecting for gold," Ms. Brennan said in January. Some boys fall by the wayside when they shoot up too fast or because their voices break.

Since opening in London five years ago, "Billy Elliot" the musical — lyrics by Mr. Hall, music by [Elton John](#) — has conquered Broadway and Australia. A first national company kicked off a tour in Chicago in April, and a second gets under way in Durham, N.C., in October. Other productions are planned for South Korea, Japan and continental Europe. All told, there have been nearly 40 Billys around the world, their average run nine months.

Though turnover is high, Billys are made, not born, and while every case is different, the time it takes from first audition to opening night is usually two and a half years. To help the most promising talents prepare for the make-or-break callbacks as much as a year down the road, the production provides advanced coaching in ballet, tap and acrobatics, all part of a program known as Billy Camp.

[Stephen Daldry](#), who directed "Billy Elliot" for the screen and for the stage, likens performing the title role to playing Hamlet and running the marathon at the same time, at the age of 12. If the Shakespearean half of the analogy seems

somewhat over the top (following your bliss is not quite the same as avenging your father's murder), the physical demands are understated by a wide margin.

A decathlon would be more like it. For the sake of the story a boy must cut a credible figure as a budding ballet dancer. For the sake of the old razzle-dazzle — this is show business, after all — he needs to shine in tap, acrobatics, step dancing, flying on wires and the explosive, free-form storytelling in action known as physical theater. Acknowledgment of the challenges came recently from Andrea McArdle, no less, star of the original Broadway run of "Annie." "Physically," she said after

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Billy Camp is not the only point of entry to the show (for the first-generation Broadway Billys, it did not exist), nor is the invitation to participate a guarantee of a future engagement. To hear the successful Billys tell their stories, not one of them ever believed he would be cast, simply because no one arrives with the full skill set. As Jacob Clemente, a former Billy Camper now starring on Broadway, explained: “You get to work with great teachers. And if you don’t make it, you can say that you were a Billy finalist.”

In February, in a spartan dance studio in the Manhattan theater district, Joseph Harrington, a 10-year-old Billy Camper from Cincinnati with the proportions and grace of a future danseur noble, was practicing his pirouettes under the exacting eye of the teacher Finis Jhung, formerly a principal with the short-lived but much admired Harkness Ballet.

Unlike traditional ballet teachers, Mr. Jhung sets little store by barre work and the attendant grabbing for support. “Always be in balance, always in control,” he urged his charges — just three of them this time — emphasizing the spring action of the bent knee in plié for powerful jumps, turns and combinations.

“I’m not interested in textbook figures,” Mr. Jhung said. “I’m interested in the mechanics of movement.”

In tap the Billy Campers work with the former Rockette Mary Giattino; in acrobatics with Hector Salazar, leader of the boys’ gymnastics team at Chelsea Piers, the West Side sports and entertainment center.

“Onstage they tumble on a hard floor,” Mr. Salazar said after supervising an hour of handsprings, back flips and one-arm cartwheels. “It’s not like Chelsea Piers, where the floor is padded, with springs. To avoid injuries, their technique has to be very strong.”



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Hector Salazar coaches an airborne Alex Ko.

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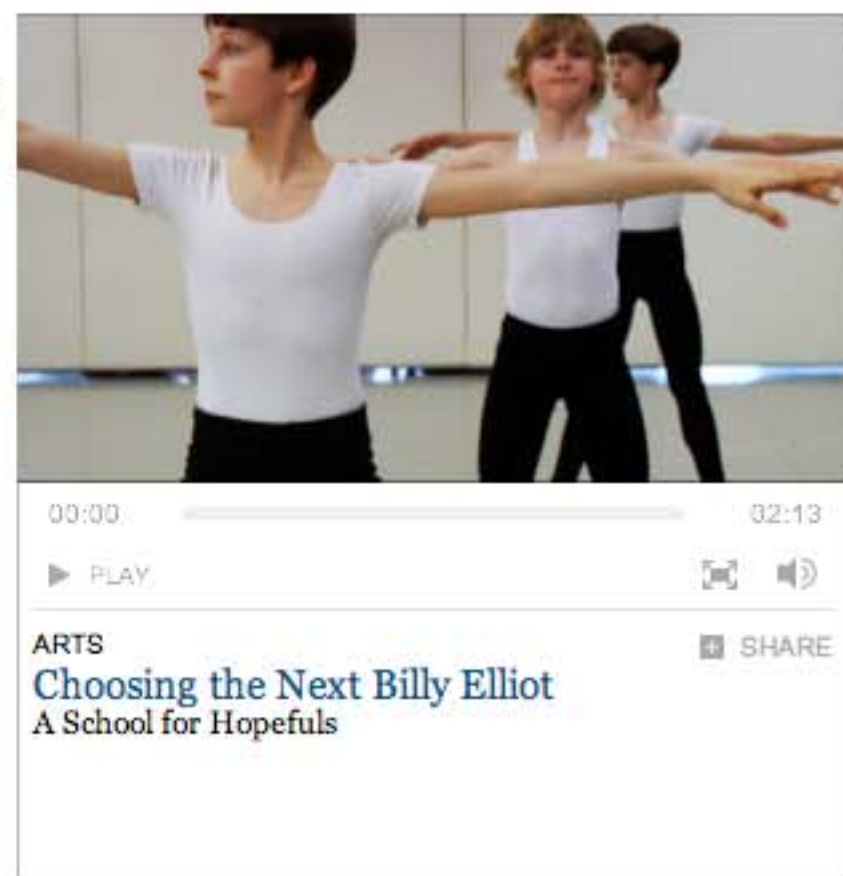
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are no longer glaring.

Cesar Corrales, who opened in Chicago in April to ecstatic reviews, is the son of ballet teachers in Montreal and had been studying at Canada’s National Ballet School in Toronto. He auditioned with his mother’s encouragement, for the experience. “We were sure I wouldn’t get it,” Cesar said between performances. “All the tap I had was a shuffle and flaps. But Peter gave me a combination and told me, ‘If you can learn this, we know you can learn what you’ll need for the show.’” A boy’s aptitude for acting and singing — new terrain for most of them — is assessed in individual sessions during callbacks, as is his ear for the signature Geordie accent of Newcastle.

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In late April the choreographer [Peter Darling](#) was looking over 10 finalists for six openings on Broadway and in the national company. “Stephen understands that you don’t get the skills for free,” he said during a break, referring to Mr. Daldry, “or without investing the time.”

Jamie Bell, who starred on screen, had it easier, Mr. Darling said. “The demands were built around his core skill, which was tap dancing, and his amazing rhythmic sense. Also, in a movie you can cut to create double pirouettes and so on, whereas onstage everything has to happen for real.”

In the movie Mr. Daldry flashed forward at the end to [Matthew Bourne’s](#) “Swan Lake,” with Adam Cooper as Billy in grown-up glory flying through a stupendous grand jeté in slow motion. The show incorporates a potent “Swan Lake” fantasy too: a pas de deux for Billy and a vision of his future self. But the boy’s defining dance moment comes in the 11 o’clock solo “Electricity,” culminating in 16 pirouettes.

Hence Mr. Jhung’s excitement the day Joseph Harrington came through with a sequence of six turns with the knee bent, finishing up on half-toe. “Do you realize what he’s doing?” Mr. Jhung asked. “Most professional males cannot do this, and he’s only 10 ½.”

Of past and present Billys on North American stages about half studied ballet in a serious way before auditioning. One (Trent Kowalik) held titles in Irish dancing. The current crop includes whizzes at hip-hop, jazz and gymnastics, as well as one (Michael Dameski) who said he auditioned with “little technique in ballet and no tap.” But the differences in their preparation

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Joseph Harrington, a ballet major on leave from the School for Creative and Performing Arts in Cincinnati, also had a head start in tap and jazz, as well as stage experience ranging from “The Nutcracker” in his hometown to “[Dr. Seuss’ How the Grinch Stole Christmas!](#)” on Broadway. He began Billy Camp nearly a year ago in a class of 8 or 10. By the time of the April callbacks the class had narrowed to two. For weeks they and a handful of other boys across North America were on tenterhooks waiting to find out if they had been cast.

Joseph was still honing his pliés and pirouettes with Mr. Jhung in late May, which had to be a good sign, but the final word had yet to come. “It’s nerve-racking,” he said then. “But no matter what happens, it’s been great to meet different people and learn different things. But in the back of my mind the goal is always to be Billy. I hope they tell me soon.”

On June 10, they did: Joseph had made the cut, along with Myles Erlick of Burlington, Ontario; Kylend Heatherington, a New Yorker; Lex Ishimoto of Irvine, Calif.; Peter Mazurowski of Bow, N.H.; and Marcus Pei of Toronto.

For these six the moment of truth approaches. Who will the next ones be, and where will they come from?