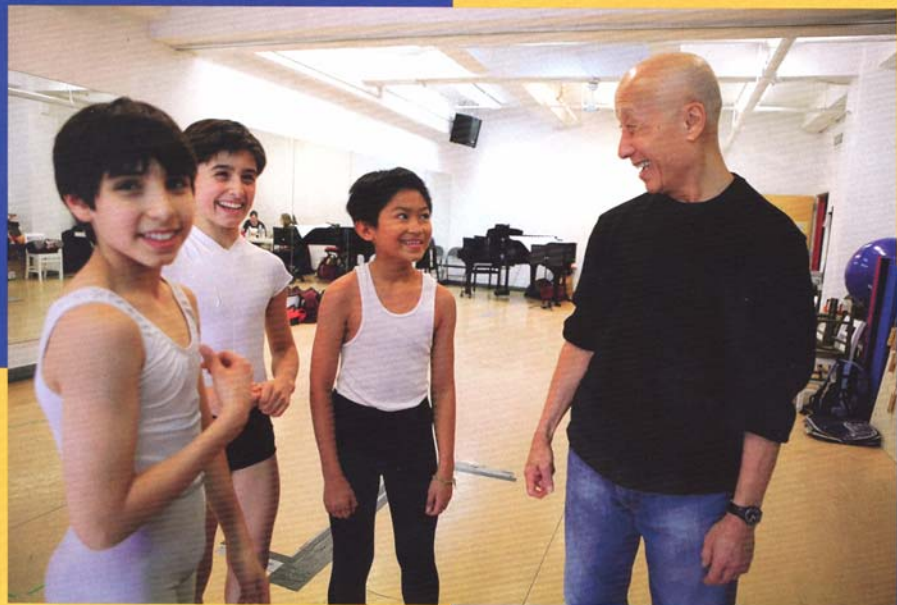


Three Billys, One Master



Finis Jhung coaches the newest crop of boys to play Billy Elliot

By Darrah Carr

BILLY ELLIOT, THE BROADWAY MUSICAL SENSATION that garnered an astonishing 10 Tony Awards last year, will launch its Chicago production on March 18 at the Ford Center for the Performing Arts, Oriental Theatre, before embarking on a multi-city tour. Four boys share the musical's demanding title role, depicting a British miner's son who pursues his passion for ballet. I met three of the new Billys (the fourth is Tommy Batchelor) and observed a ballet lesson with master teacher Finis Jhung during the early stages of rehearsals at New York City's Ripley-Grier Studios in December. Jhung was scheduled to work with the boys three times a week over a six-week period.

The long, narrow studio was lined with bulging costume racks, spare folding chairs, and tables for members of the production team, who sat focused on their laptops. Water bottles, rosin trays, and dance bags dotted the floor. In the midst of the hubbub, Giuseppe Bausilio, 12; Cesar Corrales, 13; and John Peter (J.P.) Viernes, 13, stretched, joked with each other, and waited for class to begin.

Jhung, well known for his instructional videos and CDs, was an attentive but soft-spoken presence as he gently corrected the boys' placement and gave words of encouragement. Each of the young Billys displayed technique that seemed beyond their years. (Cesar, a trained gymnast who

is relatively new to dance, routinely pulled off six pirouettes.) At the same time, they were irrepressibly youthful as they cheered each other on and made hand puppets in the long shadows of the fading afternoon sunlight.

After the hour-long class, I spoke with Jhung about his experience training the boys. Nora Brennan, children's casting director for *Billy Elliot* and a former Jhung student, had recommended him for the job. Following a positive meeting with choreographer Peter Darling, Jhung has been involved with the production since June 2008 and coached David Alvarez, Trent Kowalik, and Kiril Kulish from the original Broadway cast. Jhung has also been involved with the Billys

camp, a training ground for dozens of young Billy hopefuls. Given that he has taught everyone from Ethan Stiefel to cast members of *Cats* over the last 38 years, I wanted to find out what made his work with these young dynamos unique.

DC: What is your main focus when working with the Billys?

FJ: To solidify what they are really going to be doing onstage. That is what the directors are depending on me to do. Most of the turns that you saw the boys doing today, they have to do in the show—*chainés*, *piqués*, attitude turns inside and outside, *coupé jetés*, and at least 16 turns in second. So I drill them on those turns and, at the same time, I try to strengthen their feet, legs, and body. It is different from a general ballet class because it is so specific.

DC: Does the Billy Elliot team give you feedback or specific instructions?

FJ: They rehearse very strictly. It's a British code of ethics. Nothing is left to chance. They are very specific in preparing everyone for the part they are doing. That is why the show stays at such a high level, because it has been beautifully directed. They expect a lot from the boys, because they are investing in them. The boys are going to carry the show, so it is very serious. I often tell the boys, "You've got a \$136 step and you can't mess up. You've got to put it in your muscles and get the feeling of it correctly right now so that you can do it onstage. No one wants excuses."

DC: What other kinds of training are the Billys receiving?

FJ: Throughout the day they are being bombarded with so much new information—another number, another song, more dialect coaching, more dialogue to remember, another tap dance, another acrobatic trick . . . Their heads are so full! Plus they have tutoring in the morning and then their schoolwork. And that is their schedule six days a week! But they are really

open to learning everything. Because they are still so young, they don't have all of the prejudices and fears that older dancers often have.

DC: I noticed that you began class in the center rather than at the barre. Why did you structure the class that way?

FJ: We only have one hour and I thought, "Gosh, I've got to get them moving. They need to be doing more." So, I just took them off the barre and made them start to become aware of their whole body from the very first exercise. When you are at the barre, there is a tendency to use only half of your body. I'm trying to have them use the mirror to teach themselves. Do you see what you are doing? What does it look like? What does it feel like? When I took them

DC: I also observed that you stood behind the Billys for the duration of the class. Why did you choose that stance?

FJ: I never sit in the front the way that many teachers do. How can you see from there? If you stand in back, then you can see everything. You're looking at the back of the body and, through the mirror, you can see the front of the body, too.

DC: What other teaching methods are you using with the Billys?

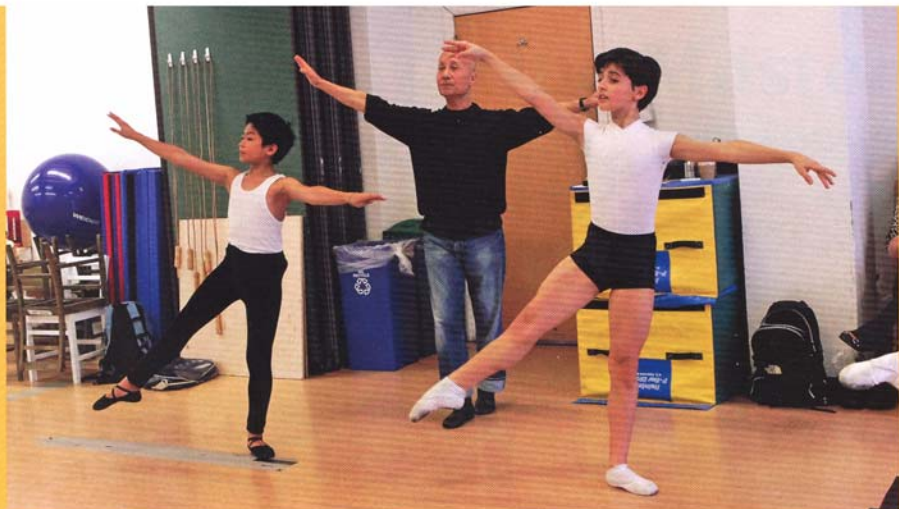
FJ: I've brought in videos of [Mikhail] Baryshnikov and I show them in slow motion exactly what he does as he prepares for a turn. The trap in studying ballet is that there are books and books full of exercises and steps, but very few that actually break down the technique. They just tell you to



CORRALES: Finis Jhung, right, with his three Billy Elliots-to-be: from left, Cesar Corrales, Giuseppe Bausilio, and J.P. Viernes. "They have so much enthusiasm and energy and they love to dance. You don't want to destroy any of that" in rehearsal, Jhung says. **ABOVE:** Jhung, here coaching Viernes, says, "In this show, they have to dance like men; they can't dance like boys."

off the barre, we got a lot more done. And, as a result of that, I actually made a video called *The Center Floor Ballet Warm-up*.

prepare from fourth position and then Vaganova tells you to bring your arms in. But nobody tells you what parts of the body are really moving



Finis Jhung with Viernes, left, and Bausilio as the boys train for the Chicago production of *Billy Elliot*.

and in what sequence. When you study great dancers in slow motion, then you can see that when they prepare for a turn, they actually spiral. They are turning their bodies around, but you don't read that in a book. I also try to get to the essence of the movement. If you're doing a pirouette, what is the most important idea? Throughout the years, I've become

much more explicit in commands like, "Put your shoulder here; put your toe there."

DC: How do you prepare three different individuals, each with his own strengths and weaknesses, for the same role?

FJ: Well, it's the same thing as when you teach a group class, in a way.

You try to hit the middle and hope that it splatters on both ends! I try to find a balance between what is challenging for one and not impossible for another. I'm trying to be as specific with my corrections as I can be for each of them, because they are at different levels and they have such different personalities. I also try not to show favoritism. I try to correct everybody equally or compliment everybody equally.

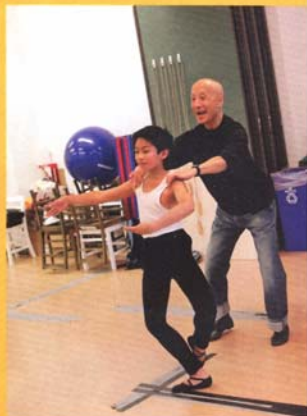
DC: What other challenges do you face in this process?

FJ: Usually, a 12-year old boy is just doing tendus and maybe a simple pirouette. But, in this show, they have to dance like men; they can't dance like boys. As a male dancer, you need to really present yourself, with your chest and your shoulders open. You shouldn't be looking soft. You should be big and should push off with energy.

Throughout these classes, I tell them to feel the lights on their chest and on their cheekbones. You also have to be very patient. They have so much enthusiasm and energy and they love to dance. You don't want to destroy any of that. You want to let them feel free but, at the same time, you have to make the corrections that they need for the show.

“Down the road, they’re going to perform the show two or three times a week for the next few years. I’m trying to make sure that they are working correctly and that they are not heading toward injury.”

—Finis Jhung



Jhung's main teaching goal, he says, is "to solidify what [the boys] are really going to be doing onstage."

DC: Has this experience changed your perspective about teaching?

FJ: I think technically it has not changed my teaching, as much as it has verified that I'm on the right track and that I'm seeing the things that matter most. It's like teaching with X-ray eyes all of the time. Looking inside the body. Seeing the bones moving. It goes back to the idea of finding the essence of the movement and trying to focus on correct preparation, not on position. Many of the ideas in my last video have evolved from working with the boys—how to get them on their leg and how to get them in the air. I would say that it has been a workshop for me, too, because I've been learning. How do I keep that fire lit, but also give them new ideas? Down the road, they're going to perform the show two or three times a week for the next few years. I'm trying to make sure that they are working correctly and that they are not heading toward injury. I'm trying to get them to be able to give their maximum performance, which will, of course, make the show happy and make the audience happy.

DC: How else has working with the Billys affected you?

FJ: Well, when I was growing up

in Hawaii, we were very poor and New York City was just a dream. I used to dance around the house for hours to *Swan Lake*. This show has such deep resonance for me because the dream ballet scene is to *Swan Lake*! For me, it's the story of my life. I was the same [as Billy]. Even though my parents let

me study, I had no friends to share it with. You couldn't be an Oriental boy in Hawaii in the '40s and talk about ballet. I know what [Billy's] passion feels like because all I had going for me was my love of dance. Working with these boys is kind of like coming full circle. I feel very privileged to work with them. ✦