

# Finis Jhung

Coaching the boys of  
*Billy Elliot: The Musical*  
BY GIANNELLA M. GARRETT



Finis Jhung leads the Chicago Billy Elliots in tendu exercises.

After a morning of acting, dialect and vocal tutoring, the three new boys cast to star in *Billy Elliot: The Musical* tumble into the studio, all smiles, testing out their turns. At the helm of coaching these new Billys is master teacher Finis Jhung. He calmly guides them through slow pliés and a smooth progression of ballet exercises, continually encouraging and correcting, using vivid imagery to spark their imaginations: Burn a hole into the mirror as you spot, drill a hole into the floor with your foot, push your arms as if you were swimming. Forty-five minutes later, the budding danseurs practice dazzling tours, pirouettes and jetés that will soon bring audiences to their feet, as the Tony Award-winning Broadway hit embarks on a national tour this month, beginning at Chicago's Ford Center for the Performing Arts/Oriental Theater.

Jhung, a critically hailed former soloist for the San Francisco and Joffrey Ballets and principal at Harkness Ballet, has taught a devoted following of professional and student dancers since 1972,

presented at numerous teacher's workshops and produced a series of instructional DVDs. Tapped to train the original Billys by Nora Brennan, the show's children's casting director (and former Jhung student), Jhung was invited to remain on the job after choreographer Peter Darling and director Stephen Daldry witnessed his impressive methods.

**Dance Teacher: What do you emphasize in the boys' training?**

**Finis Jhung:** We have an hour class, three times a week, so every moment counts. Instead of warming up at the barre, I start them in the center—it's the fastest way to warm up, using their entire bodies. I'm also working with them on correct alignment, training them not to force anything and to use their weight and energy properly. And I'm concentrating on their feet to help them gain a better sense of balance, since they dance on a raked stage and must do 16 turns in second position during the show's finale. I tell them to think of their feet as hands and their

toes as fingers, and to grab and hold onto the floor when they plié. I am also training them to understand that there's nothing we can't improve.

**DT: Our readers are forever curious about training male dancers. Do you have any advice?**

**FJ:** The challenging part is getting boys to understand it's more than the positions—it's about preparation. The male technique demands virtuoso turns and jumps—they need to have strength in the legs and feet to push up in the air and land without injury. I have students do what I call the isometric plié, which uses resistance and opposition to engage the muscles. For the *Billy Elliot* boys, this is a totally new concept; it's not usually taught this way. They are used to thinking plié means you go down and up, and that's it. But they're grasping my concepts and especially respond to the video clips—actual proof—of great male dancers like Mikhail Baryshnikov, Peter Schaufuss and Joseph Michael Gatti. That's the

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Jhung uses this exercise to help the boys strengthen their toes and feet.

key. They have an image and can see themselves doing that. It's about keeping their energy and enthusiasm up, while correcting and making sure they do things properly.

**DT:** These boys will remember you as a major influence in their dance training. Who influenced your career the most?

**FJ:** "Mr. C," Willam F. Christensen at the University of Utah, made me realize you're always dancing for the audience. Rosella Hightower emphasized balance, simplicity and internalization. Madame Valentina Pereyaslavac instilled in me a love for movement. David Howard, who as ballet master at Harkness, gave me private lessons for almost half a year and would give me performance notes after every show telling me what I did and didn't need to do.

**DT:** What do you love most about your career and the path it's taken?

**FJ:** I see myself all over again in these boys. In the show's dream ballet they dance to the same *Swan Lake* music I did when I was their age, without a clue that I would ever go to New York. It's been that journey from there to here, plus all the terrific things in between. **DT**

*Giannella M. Garrett received a degree in journalism from Boston University and studies ballet in New York City.*

Photo by Giannella M. Garrett

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