

BOYS DON'T CRY



Do boys still have a problem with dance? Is ballet especially daunting?
Sanjoy Roy meets ballet boys, b-boys and superheroes.

Fitting in... Boys Only! at the Point Photo: Chris Gorman for *Dance Gazette*

Off the walls... A Boys Only! dancer and (right) the Step into Dance street dance company
Photos: Chris Gorman; Mark Lees

I walk through a foyer café where parents chat idly over elevenses, down a corridor to the left, past a gaggle of girls in gold harem pants posing for a group photo, and towards a rehearsal studio. The window in the door frames a motley group of boys, aged about nine to 16, hurtling, cartwheeling, and generally careening around. After a while, they form lines and step in time, weaving pleasing if somewhat ragged patterns round the studio. A little later, it's the bouncing-off-the-walls thing again. Then back to the steps and patterns. What kind of class is this?

It's a ballet class – but a very particular one. It's part of a Boys Only! weekend at the Point dance centre in Eastleigh – a nationwide Royal Academy of Dance programme that offers ballet and contemporary dance classes, creative workshops and an informal show, designed specifically for boys, with male teachers. It certainly has a very different atmosphere and energy from the cluster of girls I'd passed on the way in.

'Boys,' smiles teacher Joel Morris when he emerges from the studio, 'are in general much more physical than a class of young girls. And less patient. Just because they're doing ballet doesn't change that.' So he tries to adapt his class to that dynamic. 'You have to keep the impact and energy high so you don't lose them. But you also have to be able to put a leash on that.' That alternation between letting loose and reining in was exactly what I'd seen. The steps and formations were the taught material; the bounding and somersaulting just happened spontaneously during the teaching breaks.

But this weekend is about much more than teaching. 'Outside, these boys might often be the only boy in their dance class,' says Morris. 'Here, they get their own time. They're not the add-on or the afterthought. It's really

good for them to mix with other boys who dance. Instead of being the minority, they're with lots of other boys with the same interest. They're not here just to train, the whole weekend is also about meeting people and sharing interests. It builds a community.'

Lunchbreak certainly seems to be good community-building time, so I ask the boys what the weekend means for them. 'It's mostly girls in most dance groups, so you can feel kind of cut off,' says Arthur, a sprightly 11-year-old who's also the only boy in his gymnastics class. 'Here you feel like you fit in more.' The boys around nod in agreement. They're a wide range of ages and abilities, but none of them feel like they don't belong here. But is wanting to fit in such an issue? After all, most of the boys get along fine with the girls in their classes (though one, admittedly, says he finds them 'a bit stuck up'). It soon



'You don't have to go with the crowd. You can do whatever you want'

Lenny, 10

becomes clear that it is only certain other people who make such an issue about fitting in.

'At school I used to get bullied quite a lot because of dance,' says 10-year-old Lenny. 'I started ballet when I was five, but I quit because I was getting bullied too much. I was seven when I started up again and I just felt a lot better about myself. I could just express myself better.'

Lenny's story triggers a rush of others. 'I started when I was four or five, and people at school used to bully me,' says Alex, aged 12. 'Everyone said: you're weird, why do you like dance? But I carried on and eventually they stopped. I think they wanted to get a reaction and when I didn't react they got bored.'

'I stopped because of bullying,' says Luke, at 16 the oldest boy in the group. 'But later I thought: why should I stop because of people being selfish and rude and not understanding that I like it? Now I have friends who accept what I do. I still get comments but because this is something I know I want to do, I can blank them out.'

'People made fun of me too,' says 12-year-old Ethan. 'But then I got into Matthew Bourne's *Lord of the Flies*' – an

award-winning, boys-only production that toured the UK – 'and I haven't been bullied since. I guess because they think I must be actually doing something or getting somewhere.'

It's chilling that Ethan mentions *Lord of the Flies* which is, after all, a story about bullying among boys. And it's heartbreaking to hear that bullying, belittling and teasing are so common that they seem normalised, as if that is what to expect if you are a boy who dances. What's heartwarming, though, is that all the boys I spoke with mentioned family members who were supportive and encouraging. Heartwarming also to see how engaged they are here – yabbering away through lunchbreak, launching themselves into rehearsals. And dancing – with each other, for their audience, for themselves.

A week later, I'm at a different kind of rehearsal, at RAD headquarters in London, where various groups from their Step into Dance programme prepare for their end-of-year showcase. I sit in on the street dance group, where there are as many boys as girls. They're older (16–19) than the Boys Only! group and they're working on a piece with a lot of krumping – a high-tension, high-energy style that



Get them jumping... Iain Mackay running an RAD class and (right) with his sons
Photos: Mark Mainz; Andrew Fox for *Dance Gazette*



‘Outside, these boys might often be the only boy in class. Here they get their own time’ Joel Morris, teacher

The implication is that ballet is more restricted by class, race (the boys here are predominantly black; in Eastleigh they were all white) and not least by gender. The perception, in short, is that it’s acceptable for boys to do street dance, but with ballet they’ll come up against a problem, because ballet is basically for girls.

It’s an issue that Iain Mackay, a dancer with Birmingham Royal Ballet who was appointed the RAD’s inaugural Male Dance Ambassador in March 2016, is eager to address. ‘It’s easy for girls to fall into ballet,’ he says. ‘They see the classic images of the tutu and the princesses, and it’s very appealing. And the benefits are huge: co-ordination, exercise, posture, use of creative imagination.’

Mackay, who has sons aged 2 and 7, sees how difficult it still is for boys. ‘At birthday parties it’s always the boys who are up dancing first. But as dancing is presented as ballet, they close up. It’s so much harder for boys to come to ballet than girls, and it’s a lot easier for them to walk away from it again. But the benefits of fitness, confidence and imagination are just the same. The push is to bridge that gap.’

Boys-only classes are certainly one strategy, but he’s also keen to change the whole tenor of ballet teaching, especially at foundation level. ‘Ballet is a very disciplined form, and I’ve found girls to be in general more focused and disciplined than boys of the same age. So instead of the teacher saying you have to do these exercises, or you can’t do *this* till you’ve done *that*, the first thing is to get them involved. You have to play with their imaginations, get them moving.’ At this level he’ll happily forgo the traditional ballet class format of barre and centre and use movement-based games, or imagery from computer games or film. ‘I try to grab their imagination first. Then when it comes to technique, they know where it’s leading. Instead of starting with the plié and telling them it leads to jumping, I get them jumping first. Then I’ll say: how can we help you jump like a superhero? Let’s work on this plié.’



He’s also in favour of a ‘coaching’ style that focuses on goals, motivation and the individual rather than a more traditional copybook approach. And at foundation level, he’ll happily ditch the uniform of tights and leotards and let the boys wear trackies or shorts and t-shirts. ‘I don’t need to see every movement at this stage. I just need them to engage, to want to come back.’

Mackay’s ultimate motive is not just to change the culture of ballet, but to change the place of ballet in culture. ‘With TV talent shows like *The X Factor* or *Strictly Come Dancing*, dance has moved much more to the forefront. It’s the perfect time to show what ballet actually offers.’

Visibility, exposure and education are key. Mackay only began ballet because his brother Rory (also with BRB) didn’t want to be the only boy in his class; and Rory only began because he had seen Leroy from the TV series *Fame* do a split jump.

‘I’d love to see more ballet in schools,’ Mackay continues. ‘It doesn’t have to be in its purest form. It’s something that children should be allowed to experience, and it would help break down barriers for boys. I don’t

mean becoming professionals, I mean enriching their lives, giving them confidence, a creative release, helping them grow as people. But they miss out because they think it’s not for them, or because of the stigma that it’s effeminate. If they try it and don’t like it – fine. And who knows, one of them could be the boy who stops bullying others.’

Mackay’s energy and enthusiasm are not fundamentally about ballet, but about freedom, fairness and affirmation: a boy who finds ballet inspiring should be free to follow his choice. He would surely be heartened by the boys I met in Eastleigh. ‘It doesn’t really matter what gender you are, you can do any type of dance,’ said 12-year-old Arthur blithely. ‘Boys can do dance, girls can do football. It’s not anything you should be judged upon,’ said Luke, 16. And for Lenny, 10, ‘You don’t have to just go with the crowd. You can do whatever you want.’