

ONE AND ONLY

What is it like to be the only boy in your dance class? A director and young dancer tell all.

'EVEN THE NUNS SAID I SHOULD STOP'

I was the only boy in class throughout my whole training in Perth, western Australia, until I went to the Australian Ballet School in Melbourne. I guess it seemed normal. I didn't think there were any other boys learning ballet in Perth – however, when I went to the ABS I found three other very talented boys from my home town.

I started training at the age of six and thought that everyone would be as thrilled as I was. Seems they weren't and I spent the rest of my school years being pretty much ostracised. It was the early 1970s and ballet was not seen as a boys' pastime. Even the nuns at my primary school instructed my parents that I shouldn't be allowed to continue. Luckily they ignored that advice and I kept going. It gave me a real sense of commitment and purpose, and while it was tough to be picked on and

taunted for something I loved doing, it really made me determined to succeed. I remember my mother's wise words: ignore them and they will get sick of teasing you.

These days, such reactions are less common but can still happen. I think that boys have an easier time now because their fathers are different men to those from my father's generation. The gender divide is much more fluid: girls playing football and cricket, and boys doing ballet are seen as perfectly normal, whereas I think my father would have had a much tougher time from his peers with a ballet dancing son.

To any teacher with just one boy in their class, I would say that if this boy is there he really wants to dance and so encourage and nurture him as much as you can. It can be tricky to divide time to teach the different

syllabi but your concerts will be so much more interesting with some men involved. To the young dancer, I would say enjoy being unique but try to find outlets like junior ballet clubs, companies or summer schools where you can interact with other boys. To a boy's parents I say: congratulations! If your son is devoted to being a dancer he will learn self-discipline, co-ordination and teamwork, and will be exposed to a whole world of rich artistic experiences that, even if he never becomes a dancer, will benefit him for his whole life.

David McAllister
Australian Ballet's Artistic Director and
RAD Vice President





'IT'S LIKE HAVING A PRIVATE COACH'

I have always enjoyed having classes by myself. I gained a lot of knowledge from insightful teachers – it's like having a private coach. At my first dance school, when I was aged eight to 10, I was the only boy in the whole school – so I was regarded as an oddity! I was regularly taken into classes on my own (down in the basement in very cramped conditions) to learn the RAD classical ballet and ISTD modern and tap syllabi at an accelerated rate and to concentrate on different aspects of the syllabus such as male variations.

My first full-time vocational school, from the age of 10, was quite different as there were other male students in all my classes. On Saturdays, however, an outside RAD teacher called Jennifer Hale taught an extra-curricular class on the Intermediate to Advanced syllabus, and on many occasions I was not only the only male, but sometimes the only student! Even when receiving my Solo Seal award last June, I was the only male student.

Most teenagers didn't want to spend their free time doing extra dancing, but being dedicated enough to put in the extra work and push yourself to improve is the attitude that company directors are looking for. I have always known that all I have wanted to do with my life was to become a professional ballet dancer, and I have never lost my focus.

If a teacher is lucky enough to have a single male pupil, try to include him in normal classes with the girls as there will be less embarrassment later on when pas de deux is introduced. My advice to other 'only' boys is to make the most of the individual attention that you will undoubtedly be given; listen to your corrections and make sure you act upon them. Become proficient at recognising your faults – if you join a ballet company, you will not have the luxury of a teacher telling you what you are doing wrong, and you must have the inner drive and commitment to push yourself to be better.

Joseph Edy took part in Genée 2013 and 2015 and dances with FX Šalda Theatre, Czech Republic