



MUSIC BY **ELTON JOHN**
BOOK & LYRICS BY **LEE HALL**
DIRECTED BY **STEPHEN DALDRY**
CHOREOGRAPHY **PETER DARLING**

BILLY ELLIOT

THE MUSICAL

Learning Guide

Welcome to the 2026-2027 Production Learning Guide for *Billy Elliot*. This guide supports students and teachers in exploring *Billy Elliot* through Drama & Theatre, Dance and PSHE.

You don't need to work through the guide chronologically: simply choose what suits your learners best.

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SYNOPSIS

The musical begins in 1984, when the National Union of Mineworkers, led by Arthur Scargill, go on strike to protest pit closures that are being initiated across the country by Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.

Set in the County Durham village of Easington, *Billy Elliot* tells the story of 11 year old Billy who lives with his widowed father Jackie and older brother Tony, who are both miners in the local colliery. Billy's mum died in 1981. His Grandma also lives with them, and is showing signs of dementia.

Billy and his friend Michael attend Saturday morning boxing classes led by George. However, one day Billy finds himself in Mrs Wilkinson's ballet class after trying to return a key. He quickly becomes hooked on the ability to express himself through movement and Mrs Wilkinson discovers Billy has a natural talent that she wishes to nurture. A friendship slowly grows between Billy and Mrs Wilkinson's daughter Debbie.

As the strike continues, tensions in the community increase, with those who continue to work in the mines being called 'scabs'. Police are drafted in from across Britain in an attempt to control the increasingly violent protests and Tony takes a hammer from Jackie's toolkit to defend himself, despite his father's pleas not to. Billy witnesses the row and escapes to his bedroom. He has no outlet for his emotions apart from his dance lessons, which he continues to keep secret from his family.

Billy discovers that Michael has been dressing up in his mum and sister's clothes. It's another secret within a society in which masculinity and strength are praised: there is no place for sensitivity, difference or creativity. Billy accepts Michael's differences: his non-judgemental attitude makes Michael safe enough to admit to Billy that he is gay, aware that he lives in a very uncertain, homophobic and judgemental community.

Mrs Wilkinson wants Billy to audition for the Royal Ballet School: a professional dance school based in London. Billy misses his first opportunity to audition in Newcastle because Tony is in trouble with the Police. Mrs Wilkinson visits the house, and Tony exchanges angry words with her. Jackie is furious when he discovers that Billy has been dancing, and that Mrs Wilkinson has been teaching him. Not only is dancing not a masculine activity, there is also no money for the audition fee or the travel to London for another opportunity for Billy to audition. The Miners' Strike has continued and the family is living on the poverty line.

At Christmas, Jackie sees Billy dancing alone and realises that Billy needs a future. He decides he must go back to work, even if that means he is breaking the strike.

Tony and other miners confront Jackie in the Elliot home, and threaten him with violence. Billy is accidentally struck when he gets in between his father and brother. The miners realise that Billy should be the priority and begin to collect money for Billy's audition so that Jackie does not have to return to the mines.

A strike breaker who has continued to work approaches them and offers Billy money that will enable him to go to London. Tony vehemently refuses to take the money because the man is a 'scab'. Jackie overrules him. It is this money which can make Billy's dream a reality.

At the Royal Ballet School auditions, Jackie feels completely out of place. Billy's audition goes wrong when his music cassette unspools and he lashes out at another auditionee. However, he is able to fully express himself when one of the audition panel asks him what it feels like when he's dancing. When the letter arrives to tell Billy he has been successful, the celebrations are short lived. George arrives to tell Jackie that the Regional Committee has caved into pressure and ended the strike. Tony is furious and tells Billy that when he comes back from his dance training, there will be no jobs, no pits, and no hope.

The miners go back to work. Billy leaves for London and must leave Michael behind, as well as his family. Mrs Wilkinson advises him to forge a new future and never look back.

CHARACTER LIST

BILLY	An 11 year old boy, son and brother of miners. His mum died three years ago.
MICHAEL	Billy's friend. Hides the fact that he is gay.
JACKIE	Billy's dad. A widower, still grieving for his wife whilst also trying to raise Billy and navigate the difficulties of the Miners' Strike.
TONY	Billy's brother. Much more militant than Jackie, and is willing to use violence.
GRANDMA	Lives with Billy. Showing signs of dementia, but still a steadying influence when it matters most. Her late husband was abusive and violent.
MRS WILKINSON	A ballet teacher who uses the miners' social club to give ballet lessons. Notices and nurtures Billy's talent, in the face of aggressive resistance from his family.
GEORGE	A boxing coach, whose lessons Billy attends before he discovers ballet.
DEBBIE	Mrs Wilkinson's daughter who becomes friends with Billy. Her father is unemployed and an alcoholic.
MUM	Billy's deceased mum whose presence Billy still feels at key moments.
POLICE	Police from local and national forces whose interactions with the miners are increasingly violent.
MINERS	Men from the Easington pit, who strike as part of the 1984-1985 strike. Some of the miners do not strike, and are called 'scabs' by the rest of the community.
MR BRAITHWAITE	Pianist for Mrs Wilkinson's dance class and encourages Billy to strive for a place at the Royal Ballet School.

Other minor characters are played by members of the company.



Ruthie Henshall as Mrs Wilkinson
Photo: Alastair Muir

CURRICULUM MAP: MAKING CONNECTIONS

Billy Elliot has a number of curriculum links in Drama and Theatre, Dance, Performing Arts, English and PSHE and offers the opportunity to make explicit links to other areas of your curriculum. The suggestions below are not exhaustive but provide a helpful introduction to the connections you might make with your students.

DRAMA AND THEATRE GCSE & A LEVEL

Live production review:

- Performance
- Set design
- Lighting design
- Sound design
- Costume design
- Puppetry

Set texts:

- Themes of class
- Protest
- Inequality
- Family
- Integrity
- Discrimination
- Conflict
- Bereavement

Devising from a stimulus:

- Themes
- Images
- Historical events
- Characters and quotations which can lead to original performance

PERFORMING ARTS BTEC

- Roles and responsibilities
- Responding to a brief
- Performance styles
- Design
- Investigating how professional performance or production work is created
- Pitching design concepts

DANCE GCSE & A LEVEL

Links to set works through:

- Canon and unison
- Use of set and furniture
- Aural setting and music
- Themes of history, family, emotion, protest, gender roles and relationships, social attitudes, resilience
- Varied dance styles
- Use of floor, set and environment
- Interaction with props
- Specific dance steps, particularly those derived from classical ballet

Appreciation tasks:

- Links to other iconic dance pieces (e.g. 'Razze Dazzle' from Chicago and influences such as George Balanchine and Zizi Jeanmaire)
- Musical theatre choreography
- Dance history, including Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes (as referred to by Mr Braithwaite) and the development of contemporary dance

Choreographic tasks:

- Analysis of specific dance numbers, identification of key techniques, motifs and styles
- Stimulus for students' own choreography

ENGLISH

- Non-fiction writing: writing to argue, persuade, inform.
- Research skills
- Literature of protest
- Reporting: Broadsheets vs. Tabloids
- Thematic links to class novels and set texts

PSHE

- Gender roles and relationships
- Democracy and the right to strike
- Socialism vs. Capitalism
- Protest
- Grief
- Emotions

CAREERS

- Dance careers
- Working behind the scenes in technical and non-technical roles
- The healthy dancer: strength, stamina and mental health

THEMES

SOLIDARITY

*All for one and one for all
Solidarity forever*

'Solidarity', Act One

Solidarity means having shared goals, working towards the same outcome, and providing mutual support. The miners wish to stand together in the face of threatened pit closures. Their relationship with the Police is very much 'Us vs. Them'. Anyone perceived to be betraying that solidarity is criticised and ostracised. Despite their own struggles, the miners also come together to make sure that Billy can fulfil his dream.

INDIVIDUALITY

*Ev'ryone is different, it's the natural state
It's a fact, it's plain to see
The world's grey enough without
making it worse
What we need is individuality*

'Expressing Yourself', Act One

*In everything you do
Always be yourself, Billy,
And you always will be true*

'The Letter', Act One

The nature of the community in which Billy lives means that any type of difference is frowned upon. Mining was the main occupation for generations of men in many colliery towns and villages and young men were expected to follow suit. Daring to break out of those expectations attracts criticism, and the community could feel very claustrophobic to anyone who felt they did not fit in. Individuality is also perceived by some of the characters as a threat to solidarity who believe that being an individual, and having personal ambitions, contradicts the 'all for one, and one for all' ethos that is so important during the strike.

It is the younger characters, such as Billy and Michael, who think individuality is important whilst many of the adults see it as a threat.

COMMUNITY

In the pit villages across the country, communities were built around the mines both physically and socially. Characters like George offer boxing lessons to the boys of the village, and during the strike, soup kitchens, food parcels and other support is arranged amongst the miners. The community becomes divided when some men choose not to strike. One strike breaker still offers money to Billy to help him get to London, which Tony wishes to refuse.

MASCULINITY

In the early 1980s masculinity was still considered to be shown by physical strength, confidence, hiding or repressing emotion, and providing for one's family. Tony and Jackie's resistance to Billy's dance aspirations is partly rooted in their perception that dance is for girls, or homosexuals. They make demeaning comments about people who may be gay, including dancer **Wayne Sleep**. The boxing lesson in *Billy Elliot* is a good example of how boys are expected to behave and the expectations that boys fulfil the stereotype of what a man 'should' be.



Emile Gooding and Henry Farmer
Photo: Alastair Muir

LGBTQ+

Michael tells Billy that he has been dressing up in his sister and mum's clothes, and that his dad "does it all the time". The boys have a frank conversation in which Michael suggests that he is gay, but doesn't want Billy to tell anyone. Attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community in the early 1980s were often very discriminatory: homosexuality laws in Scotland had only been decriminalised in 1981 (in England it was 1967). Huge stigma still surrounded relationships that were not heterosexual, and this often meant that people hid or repressed their sexuality, to protect their own physical and emotional safety.

GRIEF

Billy's mother has died: Christmas 1984 marks 3 years since she passed away, and Jackie sings a mournful song, remembering her. He often struggles to cope with the demands of parenting Billy whilst also navigating his own grief. Billy interacts with his Mum during two moments in the show, demonstrating her ongoing influence. As he leaves for the Royal Ballet School, their interaction shifts: he realises he is entering a new phase in his life.

Grief can also encompass losing other aspects of one's life. The threatened closure of the pits threatens the livelihood and lifestyles of everyone in Easington. Michael will also experience a form of grief as Billy leaves him behind to pursue his dance training.

"It felt right to us that Michael should feel bereft as the curtain falls. Billy's aspirations come at a cost and Michael represents an aspect of that."

(Stephen Daldry, Director)



Lewis Smallman as Billy, and Nikki Gerrard as Mum
Photo: Alastair Muir

FAMILY AND FRIENDSHIP

Billy's family includes his Brother, Dad and his Grandma, who also lives with them. However, we could say that Billy also has a wider family: the mining community who support him, and also the way that Mrs Wilkinson nurtures him and stands up for him in the face of criticism and aggression.

Billy's friendship with Michael provides vital support for both of them. The adults are completely consumed by the demands of the strike, and so they rely on each other for emotional support, honesty and fun.

SACRIFICE AND GENEROSITY

By striking, the miners forfeit their pay. This is a huge sacrifice, and one which created huge hardship over the twelve months of the strike. Nonetheless, miners shared what they had. George gives up the £30 he has saved from his boxing lessons and donates it to Billy's audition fund. Other miners also donate so that Jackie does not have to break the strike to earn the money that Billy needs. One of the strike breakers sacrifices money, and risks his physical safety, by approaching Billy with additional money for his trip. Michael also makes a sacrifice: encouraging Billy in his aspirations also means that he will have to navigate life without him for the foreseeable future.

SOCIALISM VS. CAPITALISM

The Socialist principles that are followed by the miners are the antithesis of the values held by the Thatcher government and Conservative party. The 1980s was a time that focused on financial profit. Many state-owned services and utilities were privatised and Thatcher advocated **popular capitalism**. Capitalism rewards innovation and success but can create income inequality and gaps in wealth across different sections of society. Socialism focuses on providing equal access to basic amenities and the protection of workers.

DEMOCRACY AND THE RIGHT TO STRIKE

Not every pit voted to strike which meant that there were differences of opinion and experience within communities and across the UK. Each miner was within their rights to decide whether to strike or keep working.

Thousands of miners were arrested during the strike, particularly in violent interactions with the Police. The strike itself was controversial because the National Union of Mineworkers did not call a national ballot: it relied on regional votes. It was therefore deemed illegal, which gave the Thatcher government more ammunition in undermining the strike both legally and in the eyes of British society. You can find more detailed explanations [here](#).

SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"I can never talk to you again. You can't do this to me, Dad. You can't do it to yourself."

Tony to Jackie

Pit villages across the country relied on solidarity and loyalty - to each other, and to the union to which miners belonged (National Union of Mineworkers, or NUM). This solidarity was largely founded on the fact that being a miner was a very dangerous job and relied on co-operation and trust between men. Often built in isolated areas, the collieries created their own infrastructures of housing, shops, jobs and social activities.

Mining was a very male-dominated industry: Jobs for women were rare, which meant that household budgets were very tight. Women were therefore in charge of raising children and managing financial challenges. Mining unions provided financial support for struggling families. Once the strike began, this became even more important as striking miners did not get paid. Soup kitchens and food parcels were provided to the worst-affected.

Colliery towns and villages forged individual identities of which their residents were very proud. Brass bands, social clubs, classes for children, sports teams and male voice choirs are just some examples of how the local communities socialised and created their identities. Annual gala days (like the one shown in the Pathé newsreel at the beginning of the production) were a key feature of the social calendar.

"I would say that the miners strike and its cynical use by the government of the time to destroy the union have ultimately destroyed those communities. On a domestic level the strike tore families apart leaving divisions that still exist... At the same time, the strike brought those who believed in it together in an extraordinary way. In many ways it strengthened the sense of community that already existed."

Stephen Daldry (Director)

One of the reasons that the Miners' Strike was so damaging was the tension that was created within each community. Some believed that all miners should strike, whilst others believed that they had the right to make their own decision according to their beliefs and their own personal circumstances. Miners who chose to break the strike were ostracised (often called 'scabs'). They and their families often suffered verbal and physical abuse such as bricks being thrown through windows of their houses. Once the strike ended in March 1985, some miners found it impossible to forgive those who, they believed, had betrayed the miners' efforts. School children reported being bullied for their parents' views on the strike, whilst other families moved away from the pits to escape the ongoing difficulties. The strike caused divisions within formerly close communities, the scars of which can still be seen today.

EXPLAINING THE STRIKE

The 1984–1985 UK Miners' Strike arose from a combination of economic, political, and social factors, centring on the future of the coal industry and the livelihoods of mining communities.

The National Coal Board (NCB) announced that it planned to close approximately 20 coal mines that were considered unprofitable. For many mining towns and villages, not only did this threaten the loss of around 20,000 jobs, but it also represented unemployment and the collapse of their local economy and way of life.

The dispute also reflected a broader conflict between the Conservative government, led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which was led by Arthur Scargill. The government argued that many coal mines were losing money and that continuing to subsidise them placed an unsustainable burden on taxpayers. The Government believed that restructuring the coal industry was vital in order to make it more economically efficient and competitive, particularly as alternative energy sources became more widely used.

The NUM strongly opposed the closures. Union leaders argued that many pits still had valuable coal reserves and could remain viable with investment and modernisation. They also argued that once mines began to close, it would signal the eventual dismantling of the coal mining industry. For many of the mining communities, the closure of its pit would mean that there were even fewer job opportunities. By striking, the miners sought to protect their workers' rights, their communities and the influence of trade unions. Whilst many mining communities voted to strike, others did not and continued to work throughout the strike. This led to national, as well as local, divisions and tensions.

The strike began in March 1984 and lasted for almost a year. In March 1985 the NUM ordered miners back to work without reaching an agreement with the Government which would have prevented pit closures.

The videos below provide helpful images and information about the strike, including its legacy long after it ended.

CHANNEL 4 HISTORY:

The Truth About The Miners' Strikes That Redefined Britain | Miners' Strike 1984 | Channel 4



Inside The British History Scandal Of The Battle Of Orgreave | Miners' Strike 1984 | Channel 4



****Please note that these videos include strong language and images of violence: teacher discretion and preview is recommended.****

INTERVIEW

WITH PETER DARLING (CHOREOGRAPHER) AND JEROEN LUITEN (ASSOCIATE CHOREOGRAPHER)

Can you tell us about the audition process for playing Billy?

Jeroen: In the audition process we are looking for potential. We see how they pick up some short sections of choreography, and then we ask the boys to improvise to see what is in their dance vocabulary. We look to see what we can work with.

We then see a group of those boys a second and third time, and we send them into a 'boot camp' where we work intensively with them for one week. We then send them into a two week Easter school schedule. For this run, the process was about four or five months long.

What skills are you looking for when casting the role of Billy?

Jeroen: We work with the boys on the three main elements - tap, ballet and acrobatics and if we see something we can work with, then we invite the boys back to work extensively on these three major elements. During the rehearsal process they then get further training in acting and singing, in addition to those three key elements.

The role of Billy is extremely demanding. How do you support the performers in preparing for it?

Jeroen: The boys who play Billy have twelve weeks of rehearsal before any of the other actors join the process. In those twelve weeks, not only do we do intensive dance training and teach them choreography, we also help them develop the physical stamina they need to sustain their performance. This includes eight weeks of three ballet classes a week, Pilates and core strength training, which is particularly helpful for the flying in the 'Dream Ballet', for example.

We have a big team who support the boys in their preparation and we invest in their training and wellbeing in the same way that a company like the Royal Ballet would support their principal dancers. I want these boys to find their own story and their own voice: I want them to understand that they have a say in the process. We treat them as professionals. We see these boys find their voice and develop the confidence to tell us what they need to succeed. It's wonderful to see this in boys of between 11 and 13 years old!

The first two weeks of the rehearsals are more dance heavy to get a level of basic stamina then we introduce acting and dialect (a major part of the show), and singing. The boys playing Michael also

have three weeks on their own before the main company start rehearsing.

Peter: It's an investment into dance, and in all of these children who are getting the chance to have great training in all sorts of disciplines. There's so much that they learn!

Billy Elliot is a show that uses dance to tell a story about dance. Can you tell us more about the choreographic choices that you've made to do that?

Peter: All of the dance numbers are narrative-driven. The performers are constantly asked "Why are you doing that move? Who are you? Where are you? Why are you there?"

Why is the story of *Billy Elliot* so important?

Peter: Arts subjects such as dance and acting, are tools that humans can express their inner life. In a world where STEM is so valued it's a clear process that you see on stage: for each of the boys who are playing Billy, they have learnt to dance and then developed during the process of playing the role. They don't come to us fully formed!

Peter, what choreographic influences might we see in the *Billy Elliot* choreography?

'Solidarity'

Originally Stephen (Daldry, Director) and his associate Julian Webber wanted to stage the number naturalistically - groups of men stood around braziers and bus rides using rows of chairs to show men on buses and so on but I asked if I could choreograph it. I wanted to show through 'Solidarity' that we are all dancing, even when we don't realise it. We are all moving, all movement is actually dance but just given form. We move from absolutely nothing - just moving -, to folk dance - society completely accepts men doing folk dance - and then I wanted to move to a corps de ballet where people suddenly worry more about who should dance. And then we move to the point where suddenly the whole world is a ballet class. I was a huge fan of A Chorus Line and the techniques that Michael Bennett employed and I wanted to look at how I could cross cut and dissolve, putting scenes in between things. Could one put the Ballet Girls singing, against the Miners, for example.

Lee Hall was in the room so we talked about learning to spot*, and the language a teacher would use. Then Lee wrote up that

language. We workshopped the number twice, one of those workshops lasted nearly two weeks and it became a centrepiece of the show. As it came together I realised that there was still a vital element missing - the denouement wasn't right. I remember saying to Kathryn Dunn. She said the number is about turning. They all have to turn at the end! The core element is about turning, and then we would be able to show the boy's journey through turning.

*Spotting is a dance term that refers to fixing your eyes on a particular point (the 'spot') whilst the body turns. The dancer retains their focus on the spot for as long as possible before turning their head, which they do as quickly as they can, before finding that spot again.

'Shine'

The idea for 'Shine' was that Mrs Wilkinson needed an 'opening number'. I wanted to make a piece that had all of the elements of a ballet class, and preparation for an end of term show, but one that was going to be a little bit cliché. The point was to show that it was all a platform for the teacher's frustrated longings to be a performer, but also to show that she is actually a real force of nature. Billy should see that woman, see her brilliance and decide to come back for more.

I looked at George Balanchine for the patterns within the class. With my other associate Nikki Belsher, we looked at jazz dance and did things that made us laugh to find the right level of cliché and predictability. We also looked at Zizi Jeanmaire, who was a French performer.

None of the girls within the class are the same - they all have a different personality. During the audition process it's great fun to explore this: the girls are asked to perform with a specific thought, and for the girls it's one of the highlights of the show. (The characters all have a character profile - in the audition process, we are looking for some of these characteristics. None of the choreography was improvised - we made the work with other people, developing phrases, and then looked at how that phrase would look for a child).

I wanted a girls' chorus: an element that is a complete antithesis of the Miners and Police.

'Dream Ballet'

The piece starts with a simple port de bras combined with a task with a spinning chair that is an exercise in balance. This then grows and grows. Internally for Billy it's about taking off into flight. Flight is a metaphor for how we grow up and spread our wings. When creating choreography, we take the idea, and keep building on it until it's almost to its extreme - its operatic element if you like - until it can go no further. Billy starts on the ground, then steps up on a chair, then becomes airborne with a partner, and then literally flies.

In the original creative process, Stephen came into the rehearsal for the number and there was no flying in the piece at that point: I said, "It could end here, OR...we could include flying". Stephen immediately said "let's do that!" We went to a flying rig at a circus space and worked on the flying element! Stephen is great to work

with because there is an openness - he trusts you to do the job - and so he was very willing to see how we might incorporate this element in to the 'Dream Ballet'.

Can you tell us a little more about how you teach and rehearse the big dance numbers in the production?

Jeroen: We do 'Solidarity' through layering. First we separate the Ballet Girls from the Miners and the Police. They get their structure, then the adults are given their basic structure, then we piece it all together very slowly.

One of the last pieces that we teach the boys is 'Angry Dance'. The boys need to understand that the steps in this piece just by themselves will not tell the story that they need to convey. They need to understand what anger is, where it comes from and what it looks like, to make the piece come together.

For 'Angry Dance', all of the boys have their own approach. We look at what anger is, what it looks like and where it comes from. I start by asking them to create a collage of what anger means to them, then we discuss them and then we look at the point where in his mind, Billy punches Tony. In our rehearsal for this run, one of the boys came back with a picture of a fist hitting a face which captured that moment beautifully.

In the rehearsal room we have collages of the 1980s, the bands, about Margaret Thatcher, the confrontations between miners and the Police. We work very visually: if you can think of all of the ideas in pictures that can be very helpful. I show them images such as Keanu Reeves doing a fall in *The Matrix*.

What advice can you give aspiring choreographers who are making their own work?

Peter: None of us have all the ideas. We have to open up to other people.

Collages are a way that many choreographers work - it's not just in our work with the performers playing Billy. It's responding to all sorts of stimuli and inspiration. As long as you know the gut feeling that you want to create in terms of movement, you can use resources like YouTube to see what you might do. You can ask yourself, "how can I put these things together?" Just copying one thing is plagiarism, but to take little shards from forty people's work, that's creating something new.

TOP TIPS FOR AUDITIONS

***Billy Elliot* Casting Director Nick Hockaday offers this advice for young performers**

When you're auditioning, it can be intimidating but it is helpful to remember that your presence in an audition might help a creative team solve the problem of who they should cast! Everyone wants you to do well, and the process isn't about catching you out.

Prepare as well as you can. This can be as simple as making sure you've had a good night's sleep, have had plenty of water and have eaten well. You might have been asked to prepare a speech, or a short extract of a script. If you're unsure of whether you need to learn that off by heart, then do ask. Ask the questions that you need to ask beforehand, in order for you to feel as confident as possible.

We saw hundreds of young people for the various roles in *Billy Elliot* and even for those who ultimately weren't cast in our production, the experience meant that they had exposure to great training, were able to meet and work with other dancers, and had the opportunity to learn new skills. Auditions can have their own rewards, even if you are unsuccessful in being cast.

Finally, it's not a bad thing if you see the casting team writing notes: usually it's a memory aid, particularly when they are seeing a lot of different people in a short amount of time. Try not to let that put you off!

Have the mindset that you'll enjoy the process. Good luck!

INTERVIEW

WITH LIAM MOWER

Liam Mower was one of the three original boys who played *Billy Elliot* in London's West End from 2005. He spent three years with the show, and now returns to play Older Billy in this production.

What was the process that led you to playing Billy in 2005?

I lived in Hull, East Yorkshire, and had started dancing at a local dance school when I was eight or nine. My teacher told me one day that a casting director was visiting the school as she was looking for some boys to dance in a production. There only were about four boys at my dance school! After that, I was invited to attend a workshop in Leeds the following week and then over the next nine months or so, I went through various different intensive training weeks and auditions. We had a showcase towards the end of the process where we performed the dances and songs that we'd been learning, and then the final three boys were cast for the role. I turned twelve during that week and they even threw me a birthday party! I have to thank my dance teacher for making sure I pushed through the initial reluctance to sing in the auditions! That was where I felt least confident, in my singing ability, but I developed more confidence during the rehearsal process.

The creative team were amazing with us - we were treated as professionals. We had to develop strength and stamina, as well as resilience. Someone once told me that this was probably the hardest role I'd ever play, and I didn't believe them. Now I know that they were right! It's a physically demanding role and it was my first professional experience so I didn't have anything to compare it with.

What were the challenges of playing Billy?

Billy is a very big role to play, particularly because it requires you to be about 12 years old. He's on stage most of the time, it's emotionally intense AND requires huge stamina for all of the dance numbers. You're aware that you're playing an incredible role, and that feels like a big responsibility, too. The rehearsal period is great fun, but it is also very intense.

For me, there were periods in the run where I experienced extreme stage fright. The older I got, the more anxious I became. However, I had some therapy during that time, and the team also found ways to make the process easier for me. Stage fright has returned when I've played some other roles (for example in Matthew Bourne's *Edward Scissorhands*) but it's not something I struggle with now. If you are someone who does experience stage fright, it's nothing to be ashamed of, and it is absolutely ok to ask for help in dealing with it. Talking about it can be very helpful.

Living in London, away from home, was tricky sometimes and so when I went back to Hull I went back to a typical secondary school and enjoyed the more regular aspects of being a teenager.

How did your dance career develop after you finished playing Billy?

I went back to Hull when my run in the show ended, and lived there for two years. I did my GCSEs, carried on dancing at my old dance school and enjoyed living back at home with my family. When I was 16, though, I knew that I wanted to pursue dance as a career: it had always been the thing that 'clicked' with me, and something that came naturally. I auditioned for the Rambert School where I trained for three years. I moved to London when I was 16, and had a lot of freedom even at that young age. I lived in a home with 'house parents' - people who provided Rambert students under the age of 18 with somewhere to live. In my final year at Rambert I shared a flat with friends.

Just before I graduated from Rambert I got a job with Matthew Bourne's **New Adventures** and toured in a number of different shows with them, including *The Car Man*, *Edward Scissorhands* and *The Red Shoes*. And now I'm back with *Billy Elliot* which is a lovely full-circle moment which I couldn't turn down!

How has the dance world changed over the last twenty years?

There are a lot of more male dancers now, and *Billy Elliot* has had a huge influence on that. The standard of dancing is much higher, and it is so much more normalised to have a lot of male dancers in an industry that was previously perceived as very female-led. The role of Billy is 'THE' role for a young male dancer and it's a story about him getting better and better at dancing to the point where he is good enough to audition for the Royal Ballet School! The production has invested so much in opportunities for young dancers over the years.

What advice can you give to young people wanting to pursue a career in theatre and/or dance?

I think it's really important that you help to create a feeling that you're all in it together and that you can support each other and celebrate each other's success. That's an entirely healthy attitude to have. Sometimes it might feel that somebody has got an opportunity that you wanted, but it's cool to support each other and recognise that you will get other opportunities: the right person for a particular role is always cast, and that could be you next time. It's also important to remember that you're not just cast

for your performance skills: you're cast on how you work with your peers and colleagues. As an adult in the dance world, you'll find that everyone champions each other and supports each other - it's not competitive in that sense - and so you need to develop that mindset early on, too.

How has *Billy Elliot* changed your life?

I'm still friends with some of the people I met playing the young Billy, twenty years later. I love the fact that my life could have been very different, and yet here I am still dancing professionally and am back to play Older Billy. The training I received for *Billy Elliot* was intensive and I worked with people who pushed us to be the very best that we could be. I've been in some wonderful productions and toured all over the world and playing Billy was an incredible experience.



FOCUS ON SET DESIGN WITH IAN MACNEIL

THE SET FOR *BILLY ELLIOT*

The design for *Billy Elliot* fulfils a number of different, sometimes completely opposite, needs and demands. Not only does it have to suggest the various different locations in the play, it also has to provide enough space for the whole company to dance at the same time. In scenes of dialogue, there are sometimes crowd scenes, but there are also moments where only two people are on stage: there are several scenes between Billy and Mrs Wilkinson, for example.

THEATRICAL STYLE

Billy Elliot is really a mix of theatre styles. It's a musical, and there are a lot of comedic elements, but it's also inspired by people like Joan Littlewood, whose Theatre Workshop had a theatre in Stratford, London. There are moments in *Billy Elliot* that are social realism, but it has a fantastical element at times, too.

THE DESIGN PROCESS

I went to Easington, where *Billy Elliot* is set. In particular, I looked very closely at the Miners' Welfare hall in particular. There's actually a lot of filmic realism in the hall that's on stage. For example, I thought carefully about the mouldings, where the dirt would be, and how there would have been attempts to repaint parts of the hall with gloss paint. For Billy's house, there are four different types of wallpaper in that kitchen area. It reflects the exuberance of working class life, and the liberal use of colour that was popular in the 1960s and 1970s. I was inspired by the show's costume designer Nicky Gillibrand, who is completely fearless in her use of colour.

When you're designing a set, you're aiming to make the audience feel something. With *Billy Elliot* there's also the important aspect that this is a story about real events. I really like the idea that Boris Aronson - a set designer who designed a lot of Stephen Sondheim's musicals, and the original Broadway production of *Cabaret* - would always ask the director, "what does it smell like?" and that's a fascinating way to think of how things might look. I also looked at the photos by **Keith Pattison**, who photographed Easington in 1984.

INFLUENCES

Both the film and stage versions of *Billy Elliot* were heavily influenced by the photographer Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen. Her book **Step by Step** depicts mother and daughter relationships within a North Shields dance school in the 1980s. (Follow the embedded link to find out more about the book and see some of the images that Konttinen captured). One of the things I like about Konttinen's photography is how she captures the Britishness of the scenes. She is Finnish, but has photographed in the UK since the 1960s. You can find out more about her [here](#).

Another book by the same photographer is *Byker*, in which Konttinen captures Byker - a working class area of Newcastle which was scheduled for demolition, and the local population rehoused elsewhere. This [article](#) from **Allaboutphoto.com** provides more information about the book and the images. This **short film** shows Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen at work, and the neighbourhoods that she photographed. This film from the BBC archive was first broadcast in 1974.

SPECIFIC SET DETAILS

In Billy's audition scene in Act Two, there's a nod to the fact that both mining and theatre have industrial aspects to them. We've created that sense of the fly lines on the stage that he's auditioning on, and suggesting the height of the vast space that Billy finds himself in. There are also things like lighting bars and objects that you'd find on stage.

There are quite a few scenes between Billy and Mrs Wilkinson where the stage suddenly needs to seem much smaller. *Billy Elliot* is an unusual play in the way that Billy is very much the main character, rather than the child around which everything else happens. Billy has songs that he sings on his own (such as 'Electricity') and dance numbers in which he remains the focus throughout ('Angry Dance' and 'Dream Ballet') so the set needs to allow the audience to focus on him.

I've used a lot of forced perspective - where scale and distance are manipulated - in the design. Billy needs to be a strong focal point on stage, even when he's with taller adults, and so the blocking (the decisions about where actors move and stand) is enhanced by

that set detail. As you look at the set, you'll see it's asymmetrical. The set design and the dramaturgical structure of the piece works together - it's important to bear it in mind when you're designing a set but it should all be subliminal for the audience: we're allowing them to invest in the story and allow the narrative to unfold in the best way that it can.

FILM VS. STAGE PRODUCTION

The film uses a lot of intercut scenes, such as the audition scene and Billy's 'Angry Dance'. The set design for the audition scene uses the same principle but it does make that scene more challenging to create on a stage. There are moments in 'Angry Dance' where Billy suddenly moves from one location to another which is intercut in the film. There are almost fifty scene changes in Act One, where we're setting up a lot of the narrative strands, the characters and so on. There are fewer scene changes in Act Two, because the scenes become longer as the plot works through its crisis and resolution.

ADVICE FOR ASPIRING DESIGNERS

We are all very used to spending a lot of time looking at screens: the world is mediated through that screen now. I'd suggest that breaking out of that and leafing through physical books, magazines and other sources is much more rewarding. I strongly believe that that mental process is very different to when we're using computers and devices: we enter a different mindset and our minds are more fertile and able to make connections. When we swipe through images, they are all of equal value whereas in a book we might disregard twenty and then find one that is completely indelible in our mind because it has generated an emotional response.

Get as close as you can to artefacts and material that represents real life, rather than a very mediated version. The photographs of Martin Parr, for example, capture that real life rather than the very simplified, stereotypical versions of the 1980s, for example.

CLASSROOM AND STUDIO ACTIVITIES

Drama

Devising From a Stimulus

USING IMAGES



USING QUOTATIONS

You'll hear the following lyrics and dialogue in the play which can provide helpful starting points for devising:

When the stars look down and know our history

When the stars look down upon our past

*And the stars look down and see a future
bright at last*

When we'll stand as one,

Beneath the sun

(From 'The Stars Look Down', Act One)

*"They seek to use freedom in order to destroy
freedom."*

(Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Act One)

All for one and one for all

Solidarity forever

(From 'Solidarity', Act One)

What the hell's wrong with expressing yourself?

Being who you want to be?

(From 'Expressing Yourself', Act One)

It's about our history

It's about our rights

(From 'He Could Be A Star', Act Two)

So we walk proudly

And we walk strong

All together

We will go as one

(From 'Once We Were Kings', Act Two)

USING QUOTATIONS FROM SECONDARY SOURCES

As well as using quotations or themes from *Billy Elliot*, you may wish to consider some of the statements made by miners and their families when talking about the Miners' Strike of 1984-1985.

**The Truth About The Miners' Strikes That Redefined Britain |
Miners' Strike 1984 | Channel 4**



The documentary is a helpful source of quotations, which include:

- "I did pay a heavy cost for what I did."
- "The strike wasn't only affecting the miners. It was everybody's fight."
- "I was born to be a miner. That was it."
- "The wives, and the mothers, and the sisters: they stepped up to the plate, really."
- "It wasn't every man for himself. It was every man for everybody."
- "One of the difficulties is that there are good arguments on both sides."

PHYSICAL THEATRE: WORKING WITH SET

The set design for *Billy Elliot* uses wooden chairs which are then used in different ways in the blocking and choreography. They provide additional levels in moments of conflict and tension, and they feature in the choreography for 'Solidarity' and in the 'Dream Ballet' between Billy and Older Billy.

You may be studying the work of companies such as Frantic Assembly, who also use set items like tables and chairs in their choreography.

Allocate students to groups of between 3 and 5 people. Give them one less chair than the number of people in their group. Ask them to create a sequence in which:

- One person is always seated, and another standing. They must include three shifts in who is standing and who is seated. (This might also include sitting on the floor).
- At least one chair must end the sequence in a different place than when it started, but the movement must be executed in a creative and controlled way.
- Responds to a theme, for example, waiting, hope, remembering, or conflict.
- The chairs are used for purposes other than what they are designed to do. The more creative (but still safe!), the better!

You can gradually add more rules about movement dynamics, speed, eye contact, use of the performance space etc, depending on the ability of your students.



DANCE TASKS

"Can I ask you, Billy: what does it feel like when you're dancing?"

(Royal Ballet Panel to Billy)

"Dancing is as much about you discovering things about yourself as it is about discovering about dancing. Do you understand?"

(Mrs Wilkinson to Billy)



CHOREOGRAPHIC TASK

You can play any music of your choice in the background during this activity. You may wish to use music from the film of Billy Elliot, rather than using the musical soundtrack which may induce students to try and replicate what they have seen rather than using their own choreographic ideas.

Look at the above image from 'Solidarity' in which the Police, the miners and the children all inhabit the stage at the same time. The choreography interweaves each group, showing the impact of the conflict on the children, and the way in which the adult groups use violence and intimidation to try and gain dominance over each other.

Divide the class into three groups, label them A, B and C.

Using five choreographic techniques, ask students to create a one-minute sequence of movement. (The allocated techniques can be your choice, but you might like to begin with unison, canon, levels, vertical and diagonal pathways and weaving to link to 'Solidarity')

Once the groups have finished their pieces, ask each group to perform to each other. You may wish to ask them to perform twice, so the other two groups can observe and notice particular details.

Then ask two groups to perform at the same time, with the third group watching. I.e.

A & B perform, whilst C watches

B & C perform, whilst A watches

A & C perform, whilst B watches.

Ask students to discuss the similarities and differences between the sequences, and where there might be crossover or opportunity for the groups to interact if they were performing at the same time. Notice, too, where there might be opportunities for groups to move away from, or towards each other.

The class teacher, or a student, can then co-ordinate the choreography so that all groups are dancing at the same time. You can also experiment with the dynamics of each group's movements, so that the ideas of innocence, intimidation, status and opposition can be explored.

Note: You can watch 'Solidarity' online [here](#).

****Please note: Strong language from the start****

COMPARISON: DANCE FOR STAGE AND SCREEN

In the stage musical, Billy expresses his anger and frustration at missing his audition in '**Angry Dance**'. In it, he uses contemporary, modern, street and tap dance. He interacts with the riot Police, including using the wall of riot shields. He mostly uses the otherwise empty stage, and uses a lot of floor-level movement, as well as travelling across the space.

In the film, Billy's **dance** (from 04.10) uses his naturalistic environment such as the confined space of an outside toilet, steps and a railing, a roof and a wall. In the stage version, a tight follow spot creates that sense of confinement as well as enabling the audience's clear view of Billy's movements.

The film uses 'London Calling' by The Clash. It was released in 1979 and is a song about political disillusionment, and the determination to survive. In 'Angry Dance' the music does not contain lyrics, but does have motifs and instrumentation that reminds us of 'London Calling' such as the use of electric guitar. Strong and intense rhythm is also provided by the Police banging truncheons on the riot shields, and Billy's angry vocalisations as he dances also adds emotional intensity.

You might like to offer the students oral and/or written opportunities to compare the two dances. Areas for comparison and discussion might include:

- Use of Environment and Set
- Use of Music
- Dance Styles
- Choreographic Techniques
- Structure
- Filmic Editing vs. Transitions of Dynamic on stage
- Evaluation and Personal preference between the two versions
- Audience Demands in film and Live Performance
- Dancer Stamina

PARTNERING

Peter Darling's choreography includes several partnered sequences. The most significant example is the sequence between Billy and his older self. This sequence uses lifts, counterbalance, the use of chairs, unison, changes in proximity. You'll also see partner work in 'Solidarity' when the adults lift the children. The choreography in 'Expressing Yourself' is simpler in its pair work, usually using unison between Billy and Michael.

Using the choreographic elements from the **AQA Dance GCSE specification**, you can lead an improvised, or structured choreographic session in which students create a short piece for two dancers.

These aspects are:

- lead and follow
- mirroring
- action and reaction
- accumulation
- complement and contrast
- counterpoint
- contact
- formations

You might also challenge students to use two or more of the following aspects of the action content identified in the specification:

- travel
- turn
- elevation
- gesture
- stillness
- use of different body parts
- floor work
- transfer of weight

WORKING WITH PROPS



In 'Born to Boogie', the choreography includes the use of skipping ropes and boxing gloves. In 'Shine' the girls use feathers in a pastiche of other musical theatre numbers such as 'Razzle Dazzle' from *Chicago* and the performances by French performer **Zizi Jeanmaire**. 'Solidarity' uses truncheons and rolled up newspapers, as well as Police and miners' helmets.

Other musical theatre choreography that includes props include:

- Legally Blonde (skipping ropes)
- Newsies (newspapers)
- Crazy for You (dustbin lids, brooms)
- Chicago (chairs)
- Singin' in the Rain (umbrellas)
- Mary Poppins (brooms, chimney brushes, umbrellas)
- Beauty and the Beast (tankards, cutlery, crockery)

TASK: CHOREOGRAPHING WITH PROPS

Using appropriate props and music for your learners, ask them to work in pairs to find five creative ways to utilise hand-held props, or small items of furniture. After they have created the five moves, allow them to rehearse them to refine levels, dynamics, speed and fluency. Then ask pairs to work with another pair to teach their sequence so that they end up with a fluent sequence of ten moves. You can snowball this activity until you have reached a fairly extended and complex routine. As well as the visual aspect of using props, challenge students to think about the rhythm and soundscape that might be created with the props.



ENGLISH ACTIVITIES

The play opens with a Pathé newsreel of the 1948 Durham Miners' Gala. One of the attractions of that year's rally was Herbert Morrison, Britain's Deputy Prime Minister. You'll hear part of his speech on that recording, in which he says:

"Now I want you men of the pits to come through. I want this great scheme of nationalisation to succeed triumphantly. The whole country is watching to see how this great new organisation, this new adventure, this new experiment, comes out. The great experiment of socialism in a democracy depends on you. The whole future we are trying to build up in our country is for all our people, and all our children, and it depends on you."

The speech contains a number of rhetorical devices that can inspire and inform students' own speech making. For example:

Direct address. "I want you men of the pits to come through."

The speaker addresses the miners directly using the second-person pronoun "you", creating a personal connection and making them feel individually responsible.

Imperative language. Although phrased as a request, the use of "come through" functions as a command, encouraging the audience to act with determination and fulfil their duty.

Repetition (Anaphora). The repeated phrase "I want" emphasises the speaker's determination and reinforces the importance of his message. Similarly, "The whole" is repeated to stress the national significance of the issue.

Rule of three (Tricolon or triplet). "This great new organisation, this new adventure, this new experiment" presents three parallel descriptions, making the idea more memorable and building momentum. The progression also portrays nationalisation as both exciting and ambitious.

Repetition. The adjective "new" highlights change, progress, and hope, encouraging the audience to embrace the transformation. The repetition of "great" elevates the "experiment's" importance and inspires confidence in the project.

Inclusive language. Pronouns such as "we", "our", and "all our people" create a sense of unity between the speaker and the audience.

Appeal to patriotism and collective responsibility. "The whole country is watching" suggests the miners' actions matter to the nation. This might encourage them to succeed out of pride and duty beyond their own individual circumstances.

Appeal to the future. By saying "all our people, and all our children", Morrison appeals to the audience's concern for future generations, making the cause seem morally important, not just economic.

Hyperbole. "The whole country is watching" exaggerates the level of public attention to create a sense of pressure and responsibility.

Metaphor. Referring to Nationalisation as an "adventure" frames it as an exciting journey, while calling it an "experiment" acknowledges uncertainty whilst also suggesting innovation and progress.

Emotive language. Words such as "triumphantly", "great", "adventure", and "future" inspire optimism and enthusiasm, and encourage emotional commitment.

Appeal to ethos. The speaker presents himself as someone who has a clear vision for the country's future, strengthening his credibility and encouraging trust.

Appeal to logos. The argument follows a logical structure and suggests a strong cause-and-effect. Morrison implies that if the miners work hard, nationalisation will succeed; if it succeeds, the country's future will improve.

TASK: WRITING A PERSUASIVE SPEECH

Using Herbert Morrison's speech as a starting point, students can write a persuasive speech in which they argue for a specific point of view. This could be a subject of their choice, or you may wish to guide them towards areas such as:

- Lowering the voting age to 16
- Freedom of speech
- Increased diversity in the school curriculum to reflect minority groups
- The importance of the Arts

REPORTING: BROADSHEETS VS. TABLOIDS

This **article** by The Conversation, explores the way in which the British press influenced public opinion regarding the Miners' Strike. In particular, it highlights the use of the war metaphor that was employed by the tabloids, who were pro-government in their reporting. For example, the headline in *The Sun* on 13 March 1984 read, "Pit war: Violence erupts on the picket line as miner fights miner". NUM leader Arthur Scargill was described as a dictator and an army general by different tabloids.

In 2014, the BBC was called upon to apologise for some of its **coverage** of the strike, in which events were shown in the wrong order and therefore changing the audience perception of events.

WATCH: DOCUMENTARY REPORTING

BBC Two - Miners' Strike: A Frontline Story provides more detail about the strike.



Choose an extract from the documentary and ask students to identify moments where they hear:

- The semantic field of war
- References to danger
- References to family and friendship
- Police activity
- Fear
- Democracy and the right to strike
- The legacy of mining and the Miners' Strike

TASK: CREATING A SHORT VIDEO OR PRESENTATION

Oracy activities might include opportunities to give short presentations about one aspect of the *Billy Elliot* story, or the historical context of the Miners' Strike. This could take the form of short PowerPoint presentations and in-person delivery, or the use of voiceover with a digital presentation.

TASK: WRITING A NEWSPAPER REPORT

You may wish to use extracts from the film to inspire newspaper articles using either tabloid or broadsheet conventions (Please note, this documentary contains strong language).

TASK: WRITING DIARY ENTRIES

Think about the way in which the children in the ballet class are trapped between the warring miners and policemen. Write a diary entry from the point of view of Debbie, Billy or one of the other children to describe a day in Easington during the strike.

PSHE

“The contrast defies splits and solidarities which deepen each day the strike continues, often overriding the apparent issues of the dispute itself... Caught between their firm convictions and their haunting doubts about the long-term damage to their livelihoods, the often claustrophobically close communities have forced miners to say where they stand. Few will now move from whichever road they have chosen, at work or out.”

Colin Hughes, *The Times*, 18th June 1984

Discussion:

Why does Billy initially tell his family that he has not got into the Royal Ballet School after reading the acceptance letter? It may be that he is playing a joke on them. However, it may also be because he knows that by going to London, his life will change forever.

EXPRESSING EMOTION

Look at the interaction between Billy and Grandma below.

BILLY

I’m scared Grandma.

GRANDMA

Scared? What are you scared of?

BILLY

I’m not sure I want to go. Can’t I stay here?

GRANDMA

No, no you can’t stay here. We’ve rented your room out.

BILLY

Not funny Grandma.

Pose the following questions:

- Why does Billy tell Grandma about his fears, and not Jackie or Tony? What does this tell us about the family dynamic, and the way in which men and women might express emotion differently? Do you think that the same differences still exist today?
- Grandma’s reaction might seem unsympathetic but her use of humour is helpful to diffuse Billy’s fear. How else might the characters show support to Billy when he expresses his emotion?

SOCIALISM VS. CAPITALISM

“All people equal in all things.”

(‘Once We Were Kings’, Act Two)

Socialism focuses on creating equality amongst all people. It advocates for collective ownership rather than the private ownership and focus on profit that Capitalism favours. With its emphasis on profit for the individual, rather than society, Capitalism risks creating significant financial inequality and deepens class divides.

The Conservative government proceeded to privatise a number of previously state-owned business such as British Telecom and British Gas. Council house tenants had the opportunity to buy their homes through the Right To Buy scheme. Thatcher’s government tried to weaken the grip of trade unions (such as the National Union of Mineworkers) by encouraging the population to aspire to own property or shares.

Discussion: What works best?

Using research activities where necessary, ask students to discuss the different political systems and theories of economic leadership that we see across the world. Ask them to create a list of pros and cons for each one. You might like to liaise with your History and/or Politics departments for this task.

GENDER ROLES

Mining communities were a very male-dominated environment. Men were the main breadwinners and there were often very few employment opportunities for women.

Look at the following dialogue between Mrs Wilkinson and Tony when she visits the Elliot house. (**contains strong language**)

TONY

He says he doesn't want to dance. So we'll be having no more ballet. And if you come near him again I'll smack you one you middle class cow.

MRS WILKINSON

Hang on a minute; you don't know anything about me you sanctimonious little shit. What are you scared of - that he won't grow up to race whippets, grow leeks, or piss his wages up the wall.

TONY

Fuck off.

MRS WILKINSON

I've been with this boy for weeks now and you, and you haven't even noticed, so don't you lecture me on the British fucking class system comrade.

Script by Lee Hall.

Using this dialogue as a starting point, pose the following discussion points:

- Would Tony speak differently if he was talking to a man, rather than a woman?
- How does Mrs Wilkinson's dialogue demonstrate her protectiveness of Billy? To what extent has she become a mother figure to him? Would a male teacher do the same?
- The dialogue takes place observed by a number of other men. Do you think the conversation would have been different if the conversation took place in private?
- Mrs Wilkinson is the only significant female role in *Billy Elliot*. Although we see Billy's mum briefly, Mrs Wilkinson is the only female influence in the community within the story. If a significant community crisis happened in the present day, how might the gender roles be different to what we see in *Billy Elliot*?
- What influence do you think Mr Braithwaite has on Billy? Are you surprised by his character, particularly when he shows his own knowledge of dance? Why do you think this character is included in the story?
- How does George (the boxing coach) influence ideas of masculinity in his interactions with Billy and Michael?



LIVE PRODUCTION REVIEW

There's plenty to write about in *Billy Elliot*!

WRITING ABOUT PERFORMANCE?

- Billy's interactions with Jackie, Tony and Mrs Wilkinson are all excellent examples of physical, vocal and facial expression. Think about moments where they made eye contact, physical contact or used stillness to indicate emotion.
- There is a strong contrast between the way in which Jackie and Tony express emotion (shouting, aggressive physical contact, walking quickly and running, using gesture such as pointing or clenched fists) and Mrs Wilkinson, who often uses a sarcastic tone but also speaks softly to Billy, uses gentle physical touch, and smiles.
- The scene between Billy and Michael in which Michael places Billy's hands inside his shirt is a quiet, gentle scene which contrasts sharply to the noisy, boisterous interactions between the men throughout the play. You could also contrast it with their dialogue when Billy finds Michael wearing a dress early on in the play.
- In 'Electricity', Billy must explain what it feels like when he's dancing, to the panel at the Royal Ballet School. Facial expression and eye contact, as well as movement across the stage before he starts to dance, is an excellent example of storytelling through song. Billy makes strong connections between the physical movements he makes and the emotions that he is able to express. He has never expressed this out loud before, and so the actor playing Billy must use a range of expression to communicate this to the audience.



Brodie Donougher as Billy and Deka Walmsley as Jackie (Dad)
Photo: Alastair Muir

EVALUATING LIGHTING?

- Some of the lighting in the production aims to create a naturalistic effect, for example in the scenes within the social club and Billy's home. Other lighting effects are more expressionist: the communication of emotion and feeling. Consider the use of bold colours such as red, purple and pink in dance numbers such as 'Angry Dance' and 'Solidarity'. Consider, too, the use of haze.
- Spotlights are used at some points during the production both to focus the audience's attention on Billy's dancing, but also key emotional moments such as Billy talking to his mum during 'The Letter' and its reprise. Mrs Wilkinson is often lit by a follow spot.
- The 'dream ballet' in which Billy dances with his older self is lit using pools of light but does not use follow spots. It is partly the lack of follow spots, and the use of dry ice, which creates the dreamlike atmosphere of the piece.
- Warmer washes are used during scenes set inside the Elliot house to suggest the internal location.
- The lighting design uses side lighting to enhance the dance numbers. By lighting from the side, the movement and silhouette of each dancer is more defined.
- 'Solidarity' is a musical number which contains a number of different story strands: the Police, the Miners and the participants in Mrs Wilkinson's ballet class. There are various moments where the lighting helps us to envision external and internal locations, the emotions and thoughts of Billy and his father, and the way in which the ballet class are trying to seek sanctuary from everything that is happening outside.
- Silhouette is used in various moments which can appear sinister, or suggestive of confrontation.
- You can contrast the use of lighting for mood and atmosphere in 'Solidarity' and 'Angry Dance' with the more traditional 'showbiz' lighting used in 'Shine' and 'Expressing Yourself' which use follow spots and very bright light.
- When Billy sings 'Electricity', there are relatively few lighting changes within the musical number. The lighting bar that is on the stage floor at the beginning of the number (to create the sense of a stage being prepared for a performance after the auditions take place) flies out slowly during the song.
- The Miners' headlamps in the closing moments of the performance create an intense and emotional atmosphere as they enter the mine lift, whilst the rest of the stage is in darkness.

ANALYSING SOUND?

Consider:

- The use of live and recorded sound effects such as police sirens, shouting, the sound of mine lifts operating, the music cassette that Billy dances to in his audition and on his own at Christmas.
- The orchestrations which often feature brass instruments, which are suggestive of the colliery bands which often played an important role in mining communities.
- The beginning of the performance includes film footage of the Durham Rally. The recording gives historical context but also reminds the audience that we are watching a play about real life and the legacy of mining activity.

DESCRIBING AND EVALUATING COSTUME DESIGN?

Early 1980s fashion in Britain was bold and colourful. Denim, leg warmers, and leather jackets were common, while hairstyles often featured big volume, perms, or spiky cuts. The community in Easington is working class, and the miners' manual jobs are also reflected in their jackets and trousers. Remember what people were wearing in 1984 would reflect the few years before that time, too. People generally had fewer clothes than we might have now and the costume design must reflect the working class nature of Easington.

- The miners wore historically accurate overalls and jackets bearing the initials NCB on the back (National Coal Board). They also have dirty white helmets which signify the danger of their occupation.

- Tony wears jeans, striped t-shirts and a bomber-style jacket. He also wears a **Che Guevara** t-shirt at one point. Guevara was an Argentinian revolutionary and the inclusion of his image on Tony's T-shirt suggests Tony's strength of political feeling and protest.
- The Police wear the uniforms of the early 1980s, which included the traditional helmet (called the Custodian helmet, also known as the 'Bobby' helmet). They have tunics and trousers, with black boots, and carry a truncheon
- The girls in Mrs Wilkinson's ballet lessons wear white tutu skirts, and pastel coloured t-shirts. They wear pink ballet shoes. Their hair is either in plaits or ponytails.
- Mrs Wilkinson's clothing is indicative of her role as a ballet teacher, including leotard and leggings, with various different wraparound skirts. She often wears legwarmers. She wears heeled character shoes. Her clothing is brightly coloured and often features a range of floral prints and stripes, often worn together. Her bright clothing contrasts sharply with the drab greys and browns often worn by other characters. Mrs Wilkinson's husband is not a miner (although he is currently unemployed): there is a suggestion that they have more money than most of the people in the village which is reflected in Mrs Wilkinson's varied outfits.
- Billy and Michael both wear denim and different tracksuits. The Adidas stripes were a common motif on 1980s tracksuits. Zipped tracksuit jackets, striped T-shirts, and trainers are also key elements of their clothing. Boxing gloves, vests and shorts are worn during their boxing lessons, along with protective headgear.
- Mr Braithwaite's character often provides comedy and this includes use of costume. During 'Born to Boogie' he keeps removing various t-shirts to reveal more underneath. It expresses a hidden enthusiasm for dance and expression.



Ensemble
Photo: Alastair Muir

DISCUSSING SET DESIGN?

- The non-naturalistic set allows for quick transitions between different scenes and locations. These locations include: the Miners' club; the picket line, Mrs Wilkinson's house; on stage at the Royal Opera House (for auditions); a bedroom at Michael's house; a future performance in which Billy dances professionally; the toilet cubicles at the miners' club.
- The downstage left doors serve as doors out of the Miners' Welfare hall, and as the front door of Mrs Wilkinson's house.
- Trucks are pulled on by characters to create locations such as the bedroom at Michael's house, and the toilets at the Miners' Welfare.
- Billy's bedroom and the kitchen underneath creates most of the interior of the Elliot house, with the addition of a table and chairs. Note the colourful wallpaper and realist details, even though it's a non-naturalistic set.
- The set is also enhanced by the use of props such as placards and banners (for example, "They shall not starve") and the banner of the Durham Miners' Union, which bears the name of 'Easington Lodge'. Easington is where the play is set.



Elliott Hanna as Billy and Demi Lee as Debbie
Photo: Alastair Muir



Redmand Rance as Billy Elliot
Photo: Alastair Muir



Redmand Rance as Billy Elliot and Sean Kearns as George
Photo: Alastair Muir