

*Billy Elliott* (2000) Written by Lee Hall and directed by Stephen Daldry

When I told my seven-year old son I was going to watch *Billy Elliott*, he wanted to know what it was about. "A boy who wants to be a ballet dancer", I said. In reply, he just sniggered. That about sums up the basis of the plot.

This is also a movie about moving up and out of the working class. The alternative is a dead-end. *Billy Elliott* is set against a miner's strike, juxtaposing the collective struggle of the union movement against the difficulties of the individual road to recognition and success. In the end, the workers lose; the only realistic path for success is to escape from the working class altogether.

Film makers have ambivalent views about the working class. Sometimes, especially in films centred around working class minority families, the multi-generational ensemble is tied together by common values and a community culture. Happiness comes from fitting in, accepting the putative warmth of the ethnic home and the traditional ways. In other films, such as *Saturday Night Fever*, the working class is uncultured, ill-mannered, and repressive, best left behind. John Travolta hardly looks back while he dances his way out of working class Brooklyn across the bridge to artsy Manhattan.

In England, geography also provides a metaphor for class. The north is the rust-belt of England's industrial revolution, fueled by the coal mines that represent yesterday's power. In the south, centred on London, is the financial heart of the new economy. It is also the country's cultural Mecca. Making it in the arts means making it in the West End.

In a northern mining town, Billy Elliott (Jamie Bell), a very serious eleven-year old with a permanently furrowed brow, lives with his widowed father (Gary Lewis) and older brother (Jamie Draven), both of whom are coalminers caught up in Margaret Thatcher's offensive against the National Union of Mineworkers.

Billy has serious responsibilities, such as looking after his grandmother who is wont to wander aimlessly out among the row, brick houses. Such as it is, her presence provides what little humour there is in the household. But "Grammy" (Jean Heywood) is a living link to the past, to Billy's artistic mother, whose presence is tangible in her piano (which Billy can't play though he fondles lovingly on the keys), and to her own past. "I could have been a dancer", reminisces Grammy. Being a ballet dancer is Billy's secret ambition.

In his father's mind, Billy is a failure, unfit to wear the leather boxing gloves handed down from his grandfather. From the point of view of his father and brother, there is very little right about Billy Elliott. What he cares about the most, however, was an intangible gift from his mother – his his ambition to dance, and natural rhythm, timing, and flexibility – which could have worked well in the boxing ring.

Billy's relationship with his older brother is summed up concisely. They share a room and, one night, Billy wonderingly questions the universe. His annoyed brother simply retorts: "Shut the fuck up." Communication is at a subsistence minimum in this proletarian household.

The story moves along inevitably enough. Billy's boxing gym is being shared by a ballet bumped up from the basement, which has become a soup kitchen for the striking miners. The dance class is taught by Georgia Wilkinson (Julie Walters) who has seen better days and perpetually has a cigarette dangling from her fingers. Billy joins her class one afternoon after his boxing coach tells him to stay behind and work on the heavy bag. He is soon skipping the more "manly" sport altogether and giving the 50 p. fee to the ballet teacher instead of the boxing coach. Fifty pence is a big deal in a household on strike in Thatcher's England. Eventually, Billy's father discovers where the pennies are going and his response is predictable and stereotypical. Forbidden a "girl's" recreation, Billy continues to practice with Wilkinson on the sly. Inevitably, his father finds out again. What is most likely to happen in this household of compulsive masculinity, facing the daily frustration of the picket line and the long-term prospect of nothing better? Not what happens in the world of film fantasy. The pleas of his teacher and Billy's own fierce determination compel his father to relent. He recognizes something of the desperation of his own plight and sees something admirable in his son he had overlooked. Eventually, Billy and his father travel to London – a first for both of them – for Billy's audition.

The plot follows a predictable trajectory, from the "discovery" of the secret, to the confrontation and the eventual acceptance. Everyone grows and changes. The film, however, operates on many levels.

Georgia Wilkinson seems to be from the same working class stock as Billy, though she lives more upscale, in a modest, middle class neighbourhood, presumably the result of a marriage with an upwardly mobile man. Success is a major theme in the movie. Georgia, we impute, never made it on her own. We can guess at the circumstances that spiralled out of her control after her marriage and resulted in her failure. Instead of a career of her own, she has married into the white-collar world. It is superior in style, perhaps, but not substance. Georgia transfers her ambitions to Billy, first accepting him as a pupil in her all-girls ballet class, and later tutoring him alone. Typical of the attitude of those who feel they have "risen" from the working class, her husband deprecates the strikers and parrots the Conservative line about the price of wages being higher than the price of coal. His class consciousness is about all that has really changed. His pretence at being superior to the miners is exposed when we learn he has been made "redundant". Mobility is a slippery slope and all of Northern England, including its lower middle class, is on the winward side.

The story-line of the movie is paralleled by events in the miners' strike. At first the police, bedecked in riot gear, are merely part of the background. Billy's friend walks along the street tapping a stick against the brick walls and, proceeding along the street, against the riot shields of the immobile police. Throughout the movie, however, the police presence grows and they become more aggressive. During one scene, Billy's father is on the front lines struggling to stop the police from escorting scabs into the mine. The battle intensifies in violence and emotion. Interspersed with picket line scenes, the movie cuts to Billy practicing ballet – a pacific, if no less intense, pursuit. To make the point, the ballet is actually practiced in the boxing ring. This juxtaposition of

cuts leads directly to the revelation of Billy's secret and to the argument with his father. The battle on the street is transferred to the battle in the household.

The chief protagonist becomes Tony, Billy's brother. As the strike and Billy's ballet approach a simultaneous climax, and the police escalate their provocations, Tony takes a more militant line than his father and is arrested. In the midst of his family crisis, Billy misses an important audition, which his teacher had arranged. The one sacrifices for the good of the many. Soon the sacrifice will be on the other side of the ledger.

The film skirts around homophobia. The hatred of ballet is rooted in manly as well as class traditions, represented by Billy's father and brother. Billy may like ballet, but the film asserts, he is not a "poof". He has a pillow fight with a like-aged girlfriend in a scene with a touch of erotic undertone and heavy-handed heteronormativity. Billy's is only one of many secrets in this neighbourhood. Michael Caffrey (Stuart Wells), one of his best friend's, is a cross-dresser. Like everything else, such habits run in families: Michael's father dresses in women's clothing when he thinks no one is looking. Only Michael supports Billy's dream of being a dancer. In one scene, Billy visits Michael's home and finds him dressing up in women's clothing. He puts lipstick on Billy and gives him a kiss. Billy dances with Michael, who is dressed in a tutu. Being different himself, Billy is presumably tolerant and continues to be a caring friend to the cross-dresser. The director warns, though, that deviance has to be closeted. The film cuts between this impromptu ballet lesson and Billy's father who is walking down the street, drinking with his mates – they piss on the snowman the two boys have just made. Homophobia and compulsive masculinity are both enormous mountains to move. The film nudges them aside too easily.

There remains the practical obstacle of money. The piano is smashed into kindling for the fire. The beautiful jewellery belonging to Billy's Mum is pawned. To raise the money for Billy's training, Billy's father accepts a job as a scab – the only source of ready cash in the town. It is presented as an ultimate act of sacrifice of everything, even working class solidarity, to help Billy. Class consciousness is not as strong as family values. Fortunately, in a cathartic moment, Tony helps to prevent this ultimate betrayal. In a moment of 'all for one' sacrifice, Billy's neighbourhood raises the money

But the issue, again, is upward mobility. Eventually, Billy's neighbours are pulling for him. Billy symbolizes more than just one kid out to fulfil his dreams. Billy has no future in the town or the cola industry, being snuffed out in Thatcher's Britain. At best, the strike will end, but for how long will the coal continue to be dug?

Billy does get an audition in the south, in London. Despite a temporary but unsuspectful setback, because Billy assaulted another dancer, he wins a place through his choreography and through his new-found ability to articulate the "inner fire" he feels when he dances. But when his father races through to the miners' hall with the news that Billy is "in", he is met by glum faces: the union had caved in and the strike was lost. Collective resistance, however militant and just, had failed. Only personal success was possible. As Billy leaps to success and fame, his father and brother don their mining gear and descend into the pit. In the end, though, years later, father and brother are there, at *Swan Lake*, to share vicariously in the mature Billy's triumph.

