

Art and working class life, an attempt

Billy Elliot, directed by Stephen Daldry, screenplay by Lee Hall

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Billy Elliot is the latest in a series of comic or quasi-comic social realist films about working class life in the north of England. Written by Lee Hall, the film is the directorial feature film debut of Stephen Daldry, a former artistic director of the prestigious Royal Court Theatre in London.

Billy Elliot (Jamie Bell) is 11 years old. His widower father (Gary Lewis) and brother (Jamie Draven) are coal miners involved in the historic 1983-84 strike, a pivotal struggle against the Thatcher government. The mining village in the North East of England (County Durham) is occupied by paramilitary riot police. The coal miners, left isolated by the union bureaucracy, have only their spirit and their fists. That boxing is a male tradition in this community is not an accident.

Billy receives 50 pence a week, a sacrifice considering the family's economic hardship, and his grandfather's boxing gloves, with which to learn how to fight. The boy is attracted to music and one of the few sticks of furniture in his home is a piano, which belonged to his recently deceased mother. When Billy attempts to play, however, his dad closes the lid over the keyboard. During a boxing lesson one day, Billy has the opportunity to watch a ballet class. The 50 pence will now be put to use in the interests of learning how to dance.

Ballet dancing would under no circumstances be an acceptable pursuit for the young Elliot, but the family tensions created by the strike made the highly improbable impossible. Billy's father is overwhelmed, traumatized by the loss of his wife and the monetary repercussions of the strike (the piano must now be used for firewood); Billy's brother is violent, a union militant in a battle where the leaders are "caving in." Art seems irrelevant and ballet a crime against masculinity, already threatened by an emasculating, hostile world.

Billy is encouraged by his artistically-frustrated teacher (Julie Walters), but the real strength to challenge the seemingly insurmountable is an intangible feeling coming from deep within his own being. The arrest of his brother for battling with the police makes it impossible for Billy to attend an audition being held locally by the Royal Ballet School in London. The 11 year old is not equipped to deal with the searing contradiction between duty and desire. But Billy is now psychically opened up and the relentlessness of his passion eventually alters and unifies the family.

The next obstacle is gathering together the resources to travel to London for an audition. Desperate to help, Billy's father signs up to become a scab. He is stopped from committing unpardonable treason by his elder son and his own sense of shame. Instead the miners raise the money as the strike is being sold out. Billy sets out to cross the great class divide; his training as a dancer is only possible in an institution and among people of an alien social layer. Billy's great artistic talent proves capable of bridging the gap. The film ends attempting to dramatize the transcendental power of art.

Billy Elliot is not a masterpiece, but it is a work, in the first place, driven by considerable feeling. In the production notes, screenwriter Lee Hall explains the source of some of the film's emotional bite. For him the miners strike "was a class war where the state was mobilized against a small group of people. It left me with a sense of indignation which has fueled much of my work." The difficulties in setting up location shooting for the film are indicative of the harsh post-strike reality. "We didn't realize how hard it would be to find working pits [mines]. We had to go all the way to Lynemouth and Ellington to look for them, but luckily we managed to secure the last remaining mine

in the North East and didn't have to rely on recreating the pits through the wizardry of computer technology,” explains producer Jon Finn.

Indignation about the coal miners' plight, which motivates the movie's creators, while significant and creditable is not in and of itself a guarantee of insightful exploration. The film's weakest and most mechanical sections concern the workers themselves. The latter are largely monotypes with no intrinsic dynamism. Primitive on the level of interpersonal relations, they are courageous and militant (also depicted somewhat simplistically) on the social battlefield, which is permanently stacked against them. The faceless, inanimate riot police are far more imposing and formidable than the passionate workers. The viewer is left to conclude that the 1984 defeat, though endlessly tragic, was inevitable. *Billy Elliot* does make one reference to the role of the union bureaucracy.

Hall and Daldry are groping toward important matters. A certain kind of working class existence, associated with the old reformist Labour Party and trade union militancy, has reached a dead end. Not only has it proven politically unsatisfying, it left the spirit cold and dry. And, in any case, economic conditions have altered radically. Something else, something from outside, is called for. But what? The official, academic world of art? That too, even in the film's own terms, is obviously inadequate, one-sided. And it seems a little too easy to conclude that Billy's embodiment of proletarian toughness and artistic sensitivity offers a sustainable way out. By joining the ballet world he almost inevitably loses something of his former self. And, in any event, what of the rest of his family and the other villagers? At best, they can only look on vicariously.

Or one might put the film's dilemma another way. Is it possible that *Billy Elliot* is an effort by the screen writer and director to overcome what they perceive (not entirely incorrectly) as working class backwardness by somewhat artificial means? It's as if the filmmakers started with a desired end result, a working class youth or even an entire community that had rid itself of anti-intellectual, anti-artistic (and anti-gay) prejudices, and, working backward, attempted to figure out how such a happy state of affairs might have come into being. Perhaps this lends the work its well-intentioned and

heartfelt, but somewhat schematic, even at times unreal, character.

Raising such problems as Hall and Daldry do is unusual. Unfortunately, what the filmmakers share in common with so many other artists at present is a lack of political and historical imagination. Is it really possible to conceive of the sort of development the mining village makes apart from a general cultural and intellectual revitalization of the entire population or large sections of it, which must have powerful historical and political impetus? The filmmakers are obliged to make up for what's absent, so to speak, by somewhat contrived methods.

This contrivance has aesthetic consequences or is associated with aesthetic shortcomings. Too many of the characterizations tend towards the stereotypical; other elements are simplistic, such as the recurring *Swan Lake* motif and the gender references. There is a consistent lack of visual subtlety, almost a lack of confidence in imagery, which may be in part attributed to the director's theater background, where a different dynamic between medium and audience prevails.

Despite these real problems, the film is genuine, and moving at important moments. Jamie Bell, selected from 2,000 youth who tried out for the part, is extraordinary; all the performances are fine. One feels that *Billy Elliot* is cut from somewhat different cloth than previous films of this genre. A critic correctly remarked that this film was not just another narrative (such as *The Full Monty* and *Brassed-Off*) “where post industrial despair and masculine crisis are resolved through an engagement with the cultural industries.... *Billy Elliot* reconfigures these ingredients rather than simply reheating them.” Although the reconfiguring is not carried out to the end, a great deal of the film's strength comes from the sincerity and sympathy with which Hall and Daldry have approached their work and their human subjects.



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