

Boys in tights:

The Dancers Who Are Smashing Ballet Stereotypes

By Denise Minichini

The Royal Academy of Dance has launched Project B, a range of initiatives to fight stereotypes surrounding male ballet dance and to encourage more boys to join ballet around the UK by 2020.

A muscled tattooed body covered only by a pair of tight nude shorts is dancing across a bright and empty studio. It looks like Michelangelo's David came to life, his perfectly defined biceps and triceps flexing in complicated acrobatic tricks, the legs and abs tensing in flawlessly executed pirouettes and the whole sculptured body powerfully flying across the room.

This viral ballet performance by Sergei Polunin on the notes of "Take Me to Church" with its 22 million views on YouTube has inspired numerous boys around the world to join ballet. In the past year the Royal Academy of Dance has seen an increase of over 20 per cent in the numbers taking part in its boys' ballet activities in the UK, showing an overall increase in male ballet dance. However, the situation is still far from ideal and only 1.8 per cent of all global RAD exam candidates are male.

As shown in a sociological research on masculinity and dance, led by Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay in 2009, the public performance of dance is still regarded as a feminine activity, so that men who dance often operate in a sea of stereotypes. There is still a stigma attached to male ballet dancers who are commonly portrayed by western society as feminine, weak or homosexual. For this reason, the RAD has launched Project B and is investing over £30,000 in celebration of its upcoming centenary in 2020, in order to support male dance provisions. Project B includes a wide range of initiatives to broaden access to dance for boys and encourage more to take up ballet.

Iain Mackay, principal dancer with the Birmingham Royal Ballet and future Artistic Director of the Yorkshire Ballet School from January 2018, has the role of RAD Male Dance Ambassador, and is working to challenge stereotypes surrounding male dance, and ballet in particular. For the occasion he has created a fun and simple choreography to celebrate boys who dare to dance, which can be downloaded for free on the smartphone app Seenit. Iain used as inspiration all the boys he taught at the RAD and combined their passions outside of the studio with ballet elements: "This inspires them to develop inside the parameters of a ballet class. Whether that be developing their favourite footballer's elaborate goal celebration, jumping and posing like super heroes, spinning across the room like Angry Birds, or creating patterns and shapes like building blocks in Minecraft. Regardless of the inspiration, the result is the same: a strong, well held upper body and grace and strength in abundance - what every male dancer represents."

Iain hopes that his choreography "will motivate and excite aspiring male dancers

to get involved and enjoy the athleticism and physicality" of ballet. Project B is also offering Boys Only! workshops and Ballet Boys Masterclasses throughout the UK, and providing additional bursaries and financial support to ensure that a diverse range of boys have the chance to participate.

Moreover, the RAD is partnering with Patron's Organisation Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) and has launched a six week pilot scheme in primary schools to promote the strong connection between dance and sport, and challenge traditional stereotypes of both cricketers and dancers. The pilot comprises of a series of workshops delivered by both an RAD Registered Teacher and a MCC coach. Focusing on strength, stamina, balance and fitness and the links between sport and dance, this project

hopes to encourage more boys to learn ballet and more girls to try cricket. Royal Ballet Principal Dancer and cricket enthusiast, Alexander Campbell, the RAD's Ambassador for the project is honoured for the role: "Cricket and ballet were a huge part of my life growing up, and continue to be a huge part of my life today. They are fun and engaging at all levels, and I am delighted to have the opportunity to introduce children to my favourite art-form, as well as my favourite sport."

Hamish Scott, a professional ballet dancer at the Birmingham Academy who was involved in the organisation of Project B, also talks about the existing prejudice around male ballet dancers: "There is definitely still stereotyping surrounding male dancers and it still puts boys off joining. People think all male dancers are feminine, but it's false. Many boys are put off starting ballet because they fear being teased by school friends!"

However, he admits that he has been quite fortunate, as most of his friends, except for a couple, are dancers themselves: "All my friends are really supportive and have always encouraged me to pursue dance as a career. I did encounter a bit of teasing while I was at primary school, but I didn't ever let it bother me that much."

Hamish took part in the launch of Project B, together with Iain and a couple of younger dancers, and performed with them to show the progression of the male dancer. Hamish also helped Iain put on some Boys Only! workshops: "These were a great opportunity for the boys to get really inspired about dance

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without any fear of teasing or bullying, being in an environment of like minded boys.” He performed with over fifty young male dancers in a flash mob in St. Pancras Station in London, as part of another initiative for Project B: “It was great publicity for ballet and to try and encourage more young boys to start dancing.” He believes events like the Boys Only! workshops and the flash mob are encouraging young boys to take up dance and he hopes they “continue so that we can reach out to more potential young dancers.”

However, Natalie Pearl, principal of the award-winning First Position School of Dance in Bournemouth and organiser of the only free Boys Only! classes in the country, complains about what is being done in the country to fight male ballet stereotypes: “Other than Project B and the Billy Elliot phenomenon which is kind of passed now, absolutely nothing is being done ballet-wise to stop these stereotypes.” She says that there are events to promote street dance and contemporary dance to boys but ballet is being left on the side.

Natalie believes that this lack of initiatives to encourage more boys to join ballet and destroy the stigma held by society has a negative impact overall: “I do think it stops boys from starting to dance because of this stigma, because they think it’s a girly thing,

because there are just classes that are full of girls.”

The solution sounds obvious to her: “I really believe more schools should do boys only classes.” She knows the challenges and the difficulties of setting up these classes but she also thinks these should not stop anyone: “Yes it’s hard, yes you might only have one or two to begin with, but i think once they start like I did, then it’s like a snowball effect and more boys join.”

Her weekly class is in fact more successful than ever. In the bright studio on a Thursday afternoon, around fifteen boys are jumping around, pirouetting across the floor and having fun. There’s not a tutu in sight, their ballet shoes are black or white rather than pink and they are wearing shorts and baggy t-shirts. They look like they could fit in the video game Angry Birds rather than among fairies and butterflies. It’s clear that they are a very tight group of friends and talk about the ballet class with enthusiasm. But most of them still struggle with telling their friends outside about ballet and this is one of the reasons why a few of them took part in Project B.

Brandon, a tall and confident looking kid who does other sports and kinds of dance in addition to ballet says: “I haven’t told my friends that I do ballet, they know I do other

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kinds of dancing but not ballet. I know that [if I mentioned] ballet they just wouldn't shut up about it because they think it's for girls.” William, a shy and freckled boy also explained: “I tell lots of my friends and people [that I do ballet] but most of them don't believe me and say that I am lying. My two best friends know but the others are not really fine with it and just don't believe me.” It is clear that the stigma attached to male ballet is still very much present in everyone's mind. Jack, who was reluctant to start ballet a year ago but now really enjoys it, is also afraid to tell his friends: “I feel like they wouldn't be kind about it, and would be

quite mean to me and not really nice.”

Natalie reckons that further steps could be taken to get rid of the prejudice that surrounds male ballet dancers at a higher level: “Education-wise, maybe in schools when they talk about sports and fitness, if they added dance and ballet into it for boys, then it would start to erase this myth that there is about boys doing ballet.”

For more info on Project B: <https://www.rad.org.uk/learn-to-dance/project-b>