

BILLY ELLIOT THE MUSICAL

Finding Billy Elliot: The journey to become the famous boy

When the winner of the 2009 Tony Award for Best Actor in a Musical was announced, the moment proved to be as joyful and exhilarating as it was historic. For the first time ever, the Tony Award was given to a trio of actors sharing the same role. And the three recipients happened to be teenagers making their Broadway debuts. David Alvarez, Trent Kowalik and Kiril Kulish played the lead in *Billy Elliot the Musical* at alternating performances, and each displayed a dizzying array of abilities in portraying a boy who defies the wishes of his father and the ridicule of his community to pursue his ballet studies.

Kulish ended their delightful acceptance speech with a message: “We want to say to all the kids out there who might want to dance, ‘Never give up.’”

That credo happens to be one of the themes of the Tony Award-winning show, written by Elton John and Lee Hall. It’s a principle that the creative team imparts not just to all the boys who are cast as Billy, but to every adolescent who auditions for the role.

And those words resonate with casting director Nora Brennan and her “Team Billy,” who hold auditions across North America in order to identify youngsters with the skills and potential to take on the role. Those boys are later seen by director Stephen Daldry, choreographer Peter Darling, and others, who work intensively with each boy on every aspect of the show and ultimately decide who will play Billy.

Brennan describes her job as “part detective work, part casting. We receive recommendations and follow leads everywhere. There is no set formula for how we find each boy.”

Those who don’t have the means or access to travel to an audition are invited to submit a video.

“There are some kids in small towns who can’t get to our auditions. We want to make sure that any boy who wants to be seen can be seen. So we’ve set up a website, www.bebilly.com, where any boy can send in footage taken at his dance studio.”

The demands of the role are staggering: Daldry likens playing Billy to “playing Hamlet while running a marathon.” Not only is the character onstage for the better part of three hours, he also sings, acts, speaks in Northern English accent, does gymnastics, and dances in a variety of styles, including tap, hip hop, and, of course, ballet.

“It is an extraordinary burden to put on such little shoulders,” says Daldry, who won the Tony Award for his direction of *Billy Elliot*, and is a three-time Oscar nominee. “Never before has anything been asked of a child to this degree in the theater.”

Finding boys with the requisite aptitude for the role is a monumental undertaking. When casting the original Broadway company, Brennan and Team Billy traveled to seven cities over a period of eight months. They auditioned more than 2,000 boys; of those, 15 were invited to come to New York to take part in a 10-day intensive workshop led by the creative team. Eventually Alvarez, Kowalik, and Kulish were chosen.

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Brennan tries to create a nurturing environment at the auditions, so that every boy has a positive experience.

“I always tell the boys, ‘No matter what happens, you’ll have a lot of fun,’” she says. “‘No matter what skills you come in with, you’re going to learn something you don’t know. And you’ll be with other boys who love to dance.’ For many of them, that’s a first, because they’re often the only boy in their dance school. Some of them have never seen other boys dance before. And they come into a room with other ballet dancers, or Irish step dancers, or street dancers, and they come away going, ‘Wow, I want to learn that.’ We try throughout the day to inspire them.”

It can take more than two years from first audition to first performance, which is why *Billy Elliot* has age and height requirements. Auditions are open to boys between the ages of 9 and 12, who are no taller than 4-foot-ten.

“It takes a long time until we cast, and then there’s a period of training, and then there are three months of rehearsals,” says Brennan. “So if someone is already 5-feet tall when he auditions, he’ll be too tall by the time he completes the rehearsal process.”

The journey for many of the boys begins with an audition. Brennan and her crew are not only interested in discovering what each boy is capable of, but what kind of person he is.

“We see how he works, what his temperament is like,” she says. “Is he determined? Does he give up easily? That’s very important. You need an enormous amount of determination and tenacity to go through the whole rehearsal process. It’s not something that’s done easily. One thing we know about these boys from the start is that most of them dance because they love it. Very few parents think to themselves, ‘Gee, I hope our son is a dancer.’ Usually, they say, ‘I don’t know how this happened. But he loves to dance, so here we are.’”

Occasionally, though, parents watch their toddlers dancing around at home, and steer them toward ballet lessons. That was true for Alex Ko, who joined the Broadway cast in October, 2009 and Cesar Corrales, one of the boys who originated the role of Billy in the first national tour, which started in Chicago in March, 2010.

Ko began studying gymnastics when he was 4 and competing when he was 6, and took up jazz dance when he was 5. He also learned some ballet, but it was very peripheral to his training. As Ko got older, his late father urged him to study ballet.

Ko’s mom, Tammie Cumming, searched for a ballet mentor, and found one in Eloy Barragan, dance professor at the University of Iowa. Ko was 11 when he began studying privately with Barragan, and his ability was so evident that he was urged to audition for the University’s dance department under the state’s “gifted and talented children” program. At 12, he became the youngest student admitted to the dance department, was placed at the most advanced level – which is only for dance majors – and earned two semesters of college credit.

“I loved ballet from the start,” says Ko. “I love the control, how you’re always trying to perfect everything and how there’s always something more to work on.”

Ko studied at Steps in New York City in the summer of 2008, and one of his teachers suggested to Brennan that she audition him for *Billy Elliot*.

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Corrales tried out for *Billy Elliot* at the urging of his mom, who saw an ad for auditions in a newspaper. Corrales has been dancing since he was a tot.

“When I was 1 or 2 years old, I was dancing without knowing how to walk,” he says. “I would dance around and fall and get back up, and my parents were always filming me.”

His parents, Jesus a Corrales Fernandez and Taina Morales Nunez, are former dancers with the National Ballet of Cuba, so it’s not surprising that they pointed their son toward ballet. At their suggestion, he auditioned for Canada’s National Ballet School. Naturally, he was accepted.

“It’s really a gift,” says Corrales who, like Ko, has been a competitive gymnast. “It’s like, ‘Wow, I can actually do this.’ Not everybody can do ballet. It’s very hard, and you always need to train hard, but you get better and better.”

The boys’ passion for ballet is equaled by their fortitude, resiliency, and strength of character. When Corrales was invited to come to New York for the rigorous workshop with Daldry and the creative team – the final step in the process before selections are made – his parents were unable to come with him.

“I was amazingly excited, because I’d never been to New York,” he says. “But there was a little problem – my parents are Cuban, we live in Montreal, and it’s hard for them to get a visa. So I had to travel to New York by myself. It was very nerve-wracking at first. I stayed with a friend of my parents, someone I’d never met before. She showed me around, and it was a lot of fun. My parents called every night to ask me how the rehearsals were. It’s helpful to have parents that have been through auditions, because they gave me little pointers that were really useful.”

When Ko came to New York for the workshop, he knew he was going to dance a solo, a tribute to his father who died of cancer in 2007. The piece was choreographed by Eloy Barragan, who used an empty chair to represent Alex’s missing father. Ko needed to use the original chair, so he and his mom brought it with them from Iowa, and carried it on the bus from the airport, on the subway, and in Times Square.

Corrales saw the show for the first time after he was cast.

“I was amazed,” he says. “I was like, ‘I don’t know how I’m going to remember all of it. There are so many lines, so many things to do.’ And I had no clue how to tap. I knew I needed to work really hard.”

The work began before the three-month rehearsal period. The production put Corrales into tap classes in Toronto, even as he continued his ballet studies.

“I went three times a week for two months. That’s how I learned to tap,” says Corrales.

Says Brennan, “Everyone connected with *Billy Elliot* understands that these boys come with certain skills and certain limits. So they’ve had to put the time and money and effort into training each boy. And it can take up to a year. First the boys do intensive work on whatever it is they don’t have – tap or acro or maybe a little more ballet. Then there’s a five-week stamina training program before rehearsals begin.”

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Rehearsals are rigorous and exhausting.

“I was lucky because I started rehearsals in the summer, so I didn’t have to be tutored,” says Ko. “Other boys start rehearsing during the school year, so they’re being tutored while going to rehearsals. It’s a long day. We’d start with a dance class at around 10 in the morning and go until about 10 at night. We worked on everything, everyday.”

Daldry says that working with youngsters who have no acting experience is an advantage. “It’s easier if they’re not trained as actors, because you can give them a methodology,” he says. “They understand actions and what they mean, so we give them actions. The kids don’t know that’s what’s happening initially, but I think retrospectively, they do. They understand how to break down a script; what the actions are; how to make each individual action clear, coherent and believable.”

On average, the experience of performing in *Billy Elliot* lasts about a year for these boys. “We would love to have them stay longer,” says Brennan. “If their voices haven’t changed and they haven’t gotten too tall, they do stay. But it becomes clear to everybody when they’ve outgrown the role. Our three original Broadway boys probably grew at least six inches – and very quickly.”

For that reason, rehearsals are ongoing, as future Billys are being readied. The boys currently playing Billy do two performances a week – there are now four Billys in each company – and they also standby twice a week. Between performances, the work continues.

“On a day you’re not performing, you have tutoring in the morning, ballet and acro classes, more tutoring, and then rehearsal,” says Ko. “On a show day, you have tutoring, ballet class, a warm-up, and then do the show. We also have [physical therapy and strength training] and we’re still taking voice lessons. Monday is our day off. It’s the day we really get to rest.”

Corrales says that when he is no longer able to play Billy, he will resume his studies at the National Ballet School.

“I really want to keep doing ballet,” he says. But Ko sees more musicals in his future. “I love dancing, but I didn’t realize that I love singing and acting,” says Ko. “I’d love to do more. So I think I’m going to stay in New York when I’m finished with this show.”

Says Daldry, “Watching these kids flourish and break through and get to where they need to go is one of the most moving and astonishing things I’ve ever been privileged to witness.”