

BILLY ELLIOT THE MUSICAL

Making of a musical: Billy Elliot from screen to stage

Following the premiere of *Billy Elliot* at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival, a sobbing Elton John had to be helped from the theater. “It touched me so much,” he says. “The story is very similar to mine: Trying to be something out of the ordinary. Having a talent and wanting to break free from what your parents want you to do. Wanting approval from your father, especially when your father doesn’t approve of the profession you’ve chosen.”

John was so moved and so inspired by the movie that at a party later that evening, he approached director Stephen Daldry about the possibility of adapting *Billy Elliot* for the musical stage. “I didn’t seriously consider it,” says Daldry. “I didn’t think it was a viable option.”

Billy Elliot is the story of an adolescent who discovers he has a talent and passion for ballet, and pursues it despite the vehement objections of his father and the derision of his community, a coal-mining village in Northern England. Intertwined with Billy’s journey is the unfolding of the 1984 coal miners’ strike in Great Britain, an event so devastating that the repercussions are still felt to this day.

Lee Hall, the screenwriter, wasn’t at Cannes, but when John invited him and Daldry to New York for a meeting to discuss the potential of a *Billy Elliot* musical, his lack of enthusiasm matched the director’s.

“I thought the idea was rubbish,” says Hall. “I thought, ‘How can we have dancing miners? How could you do this without making a travesty of what I value in the film?’ The film has a sense of reality, and I couldn’t figure out how the musical form would mesh with this story. But I thought, ‘He’s Elton John. I have to meet him.’”

The meeting made Hall a believer.

“I realized that what Elton felt was very personal to him, and that he understood the story from the inside,” says Hall. “One of my big concerns was to keep an emotional core, and he was already presenting something quite unusual. And I also realized there was a tradition of musical theater that completely embraced all the things *Billy Elliot* is about. Going back as far as *Show Boat*, musicals have dealt with issues and politics. And the musicals that I love, like the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals, are very often about the common man. So I realized that the music from the mining communities – the folk songs, the hymnal singing – could provide a kind of soundtrack for this show.”

Hall, Daldry, and Peter Darling, the film’s choreographer, decided to cautiously move forward with the idea. “We made a pact that we would do the show together, so long as we would not short-change the material emotionally or physically,” says Hall who, in addition to writing the book would write the lyrics to John’s music. “And we wanted to be aesthetically ambitious, rather than just try to translate it from one medium to the other.”

Daldry remained skeptical until they staged a four-week workshop at London’s Old Vic Theatre.

“We got a cast together, properly rehearsed it, and it was evident to everyone that there was more than just something there,” he says. “It was clear we really had a chance.”

Since opening in London in 2005, *Billy Elliot the Musical* has become an international phenomenon, the recipient of more than 70 awards. In 2009 the show won 10 Tony Awards, including best musical; Daldry won for best direction of a musical, Hall for book of a musical, and Darling for choreography.

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“I think people understand how passionate we all are about the show, how personal it is to us,” says Hall. “I think that all of us who made *Billy Elliot* are slight misfits. We come from very different places, but were raised in the cracks of British society; we neither feel at home in one place or another. In a sense, the show is a celebration of all of that. We all share this rather Utopian vision of what art can be.”

Their vision for *Billy Elliot the Musical* was to make a very political piece of art, to put a greater emphasis on the plight of the miners than there is in the film.

“What appealed to me most about doing the show was to have the opportunity to delve into the miners’ strike as well as in domestic village politics,” says Daldry. “My first professional, paid job was working as a director in a pit [mining] village during the strike. That strike was one of the most important events in my life. It’s not possible to exaggerate the cultural flowering that happened during that year in the pit villages. There was a real shift in consciousness for everybody involved in those villages, which is part of the sadness of the whole story. Because something extraordinary happened – and then it was wiped out as they shut down the pits. So we wanted to talk about the community and the family as much as Billy in the musical. The musical begins with the onset of the strike, and ends with the miners going back to work; the strike bookends the show. The theater lends itself to big, working-class anthems of struggle and loss. You can present that in a much more believable way onstage, a much more cogent, much more moving way onstage than on film.”

The two strands of the narrative are so thoroughly integrated in the show that, in the end, each story is incomplete without the other. But making the miners more prominent posed a special challenge for Darling: How could he choreograph dances for characters who were so opposed to dance?

“You want to include them in the dances, because a musical can encompass a wider community,” he says. “But they make fun of dance, so how was this going to work? I started to think about when men dance. They do social dancing and folk dancing. There’s a tradition of male dancing in Russian folk dance, Eastern European folk dance, Appalachian clog folk dance. So that’s where I started. And I believe that all human movement – walking, running, jumping and falling – is dance. If someone corrals it and gives it form, before you know it, it’s dance.”

One number exemplifies the fusion of every element in the show, and demonstrates the visceral power of theater: the remarkable “Solidarity.” There’s a scene in the movie in which Daldry cuts back and forth between the ugliness of the police clashing with picketing miners, and the insulated world of a ballet class, where Billy is trying to learn how to pirouette. Onstage, the two worlds collide in a phantasmagoria of pickets and police and ballet students.

The scene originally had a more naturalistic approach. “Peter and I did four workshops on that number,” says Daldry. “We noticed that the movement on the picket line was somehow ritualistic and tribal, and there was some physical relationship between that movement and the movement in class. So we kept trying to find what that relationship was. Peter started exploring, and a lot of what the police and soldiers do comes from soccer and rugby.”

“I had the end of the number before I had the rest of it,” says Darling. “I started with the men on chairs, with truncheons and rolled up newspapers, and then I put the ballet girls in front of them. The idea was that the number was going to build from nothing to this moment, to this extreme theatricality. So it was a matter of

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working backwards to the beginning, where the men are doing nothing but walking in unison. Stephen and Lee and I discussed how we could add more music and dance to the scene, and it grew from there.”

“Solidarity” is one of several thrilling dance sequences in the show. And though Billy’s main form of expression is ballet, Darling incorporates a variety of dance styles.

“I didn’t want us to convey the notion that only one form of movement is of value,” he says. “I wanted to use as many different forms of movement as possible. We’re celebrating dance; dance is worthy of celebration, and all forms of dance can tell a narrative. Ballet can tell a narrative. Tap can tell a narrative.”

The particular joy of *Billy Elliot the Musical* is watching the remarkable boys who alternate in the title role. Daldry likens playing Billy to “playing Hamlet while running a marathon.” Not only is the character onstage for the better part of three hours, but he sings, acts, speaks with a Northern English dialect, does gymnastics, and dances in a variety of styles.

“Working with these boys has been one of the most extraordinary experiences of my professional life,” he says. “It’s a gift to be so involved in the lives of such talented young people.”

“You can’t just look at *Billy Elliot* as a piece of theater,” says Hall, “because it actually transforms the lives of these boys. If there had been no *Billy Elliot*, if these boys had not been discovered for the role, then they would not have flourished in the way that they do. Their growth is almost a symbol, a metaphor at the heart of the piece. We actually demonstrate that it is possible, if everyone pulls together, to achieve something quite extraordinary.”