

Four 13-year-olds, One Billy Elliot - ParentMap

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Four 13-year-olds, One Billy Elliot

Four Seattle-area boys spent nearly a year preparing for the high-profile Village Theatre role

By Gemma Alexander

“What does it feel like when you’re dancing?”
“I don’t know ... Like electricity. Yeah, like electricity.”
- Billy Elliot

The atmosphere is electric as four 13-year-old boys break from dance rehearsals. After four hours of practice, their exuberance is still barely contained by a veneer of professionalism that belies their age. The professionalism is earned — each of the four boys has been dancing for at least seven years.

“I’ve been dancing since I could walk,” says Philipp Mergener, a seventh grader at The Evergreen School who studies ballet and modern dance at Pacific Northwest Ballet School.

His colleagues are Vincent Bennett, an eighth grader at Beaver Lake Middle School with a background in ballet, who recently appeared as John in the Village Theatre’s production of *Peter Pan*; Nikita Baryshnikov (no relation to Mikhail), an eighth grader at Redmond Middle School who studies at International Ballet Academy and has acted in small roles; and Bitto Gottesman, a seventh grader at Mercer Island Middle School with training in ballet and contemporary dance.

These middle schoolers will fill the role of Billy (as well as two other, minor characters) in rotation during the Village Theatre’s upcoming production of *Billy Elliot*.

Some background on the show: A musical based on the 2000 hit film, *Billy Elliot* is set in a northern England mining town during the 1984 miners’ strike. The story follows a young English boy as he discovers a passion for dance, defying family and societal expectations (boxing is what boys in his town are expected to do) to pursue his dream. The story also touches on issues ranging from violence to homosexuality. And it’s all set to an award-winning score by Elton John.

Village Theatre director Steve Tomkins was committed to seeking out local talent for the critical lead role. “Billy Elliot is a role that requires a young actor in a very specific time in his life,” he says. “It’s been very special making this role into a reality for our young actors in that small window in their lives.”

Village Theatre is very conscious of its responsibility to its child actors, designating adults within the staff and cast to make sure young performers are taken care of during rehearsals and backstage, and that they have a mentor if they run into any challenges. Tomkins alters his directing style when working with the boys, too.



Nikita Baryshnikov (Billy Elliot). *Billy Elliot the Musical* preproduction photo. © 2016 Mark Kitaoka. Property of Village Theatre.

"I'm less sarcastic, and more patient with communication. When working with adult actors, there are shortcuts in communication we can take based on many years of accumulated experiences. With young actors, their sphere of experiences is smaller. It also helps to provide more parameters than an adult actor would have, while still giving them enough space to explore within the role," he says.

What he doesn't change, though, is his standards. The boys have to give a professional performance on opening night and each of the roughly 85 performances that follow.

Shared love of challenges, dread of tap

The boys were already approaching the role like professionals when they earned their spots in the cast through multiple auditions. In the first round, more than 60 boys took a skills test focusing on ballet and tap-dancing.

A strong ballet foundation and a dread of tap were the first of many things the Billys discovered they had in common. "The hardest thing so far is working on tap. I did not have a strong tap background when I came into this, so that was the first thing I put the most energy into. I knew I had to boost the tap and stay focused. I felt like I was behind," says Baryshnikov.



Nikita Baryshnikov, Bito Gottesman, Philipp Mergener, and Vincent Bennett (Billy Elliot). *Billy Elliot the Musical* Preproduction photo. © 2016 Mark Kitaoka. Property of Village Theatre.

Mergener was attending a summer dance intensive in Texas when auditions began, and he had to prepare a video audition in addition to taking extra tap classes. "We had this really fast tap combo for the callbacks and I spent that whole night just doing that tap combo over and over. I remember my parents telling me that I had to go bed, but I didn't want to. It was pretty fun," he says.

When asked why he worked so hard for this particular role, he replies, "I've been in a lot of ballets in backing roles — *Giselle*, *Sleeping Beauty* — but this is the first time I got a chance to be in a lead role and have that responsibility to drive the scene forward."

Bennett was drawn to the character. "He was in such a tough situation. But he loved to dance, and I love to dance. I felt a connection with Billy Elliot," he says. He adds that the challenge of playing a very different character from John Darling was appealing, too.

Gymnastics, singing and flying

Together with the two boys who will play the role of Billy Elliot's best friend Michael (Bryan Kinder and Quinn Libeling), they began weekly dance rehearsals with choreographer Katy Tabb in October. They have received training in gymnastics and singing and have even taken harnessed "flying" lessons together. This is all before regular rehearsals with the rest of the cast began, when the boys started to learn their lines and receive acting direction.

"Motivating kids to work like professionals turns out not to be an issue — the real challenge is getting them to stop when, for them, work is indistinguishable from play."

Aside from tap, each of the boys has faced different challenges as the director strives to bring them up to a uniform standard of performance across all the skills required for their role.

For Mergener, gymnastics was completely new.

"It's really fun to have another skill, but it was really scary. Before I started gymnastics, I was scared to hurt myself. Then Bito broke his arm. It really freaked me out."

Ever the performer, Bito Gottesman warms to the story. "I was doing a back handspring and then I broke my arm — bang.... Now it's fine, but I was in a cast. I had to be behind. I couldn't do a lot of things, like cartwheels," he says.

"Actually you did one-handed cartwheels all the time," Bennet reminds him.

"Bito did not break his arm during rehearsals," Kelsi Lindus, Communications Manager at Village Theatre, clarifies. Gottesman was practicing the complicated move on his own during a break between classes.

Motivating kids to work like professionals turns out not to be an issue — the real challenge is getting them to stop when, for them, work is indistinguishable from play.

If you go:

Where: Village Theatre productions are performed in two locations — Issaquah and Everett.

Tickets: [Buy tickets can online](#). \$40–\$72

When: May 12–July 3 in Issaquah; July 8–31 in Everett.

Age recommendation: Village Theatre has provided a [parents' guide](#) to help you decide if this

production is appropriate for your family. Parents should know that there is violence on stage (including a riot), strong curse words and some sexual content.