

# Billy Elliot

Stephen Daldry

## Historical Context

Durham is visually established in the opening frame as an impoverished, working class town by shots of small and congested mining cottages. 1984 was a highly politicised and violent period of union activism against government plans to close unproductive mines. The British National Union of Mineworkers (the NUM) had gone on strike that year in a desperate effort to save the coal industry from the closures being threatened by Prime Minister



Thatcher's policies of economic rationalism. Her party was politically opposed to state-owned industries and were determined to crush the unions who were equally committed to opposing them. The NUM were fighting with every protest means they had to protect the rights of members whose very livelihoods and way of life and were under dire threat. Battle lines were drawn between mobilised police, who had been brought in from other parts of the country to quell the strikers. Flying pickets had also travelled from their own pits to try and ensure that others supported their cause. The real victims of the strike were the mining communities themselves.

The strike went on for one year but by employing riot police to physically intimidate mining communities and importing foreign coal from Eastern Europe, the government broke the unions. The strike eventually ended on March 3, 1985 and on the following day, 'The Daily Mirror' published the strident condemnation: 'Nobody in elected office, whether president of a union or prime minister of the country, has a right to fight to a finish when it is the nation's finish. Britain has been put back a year but the scars will be with us for a generation.' Over the next ten years, the Conservative government dismantled the entire industry as closure after closure took place in communities in the North East of England, where mining had been the major source of employment for hundreds of years.

'Billy Elliot' explores this by positioning the viewer to identify with the miners suffering from the drastic measures taken to quell union protest as hundreds of thousands were losing their job in mining communities across the country. Daldry has commented that his film 'celebrates the human spirit' against a backdrop of heightened social and political conflicts and sweeping change. Tension is conveyed through the script's clipped language of the script and shots of picket lines and aggressive crowd shots that show clashes between miners and police. Conflicting pressures within this working class community had already pushed people to the margins of endurance but to break rank also brought social alienation. Those who crossed the picket lines were called 'scabs' and vilified as traitors for breaking faith with both their community and the union cause. Billy Elliot's family has already been traumatised by the death of Billy's mother the previous year; their personal grief suggested via fleeting images of photographs, grave stones, hallucinations and a sobbing father in front of a Christmas fire that burns with the shattered remnants of her piano. Their grief is set against a backdrop of community grief.

# Exploring Transitions

## Dance and Ambition

Determination and perseverance are embedded in Billy's personality for he has already had to cope with poverty and the grief of recently losing his mother. He is drawn instinctively by the force of dance and music from an 'accepted' world into one which is socially 'taboo' with his mining town context. This natural affinity to dance is stressed in many ways including the use of song lyrics 'Danced myself right out the womb' and by the slow motion shot of Billy jumping on the bed and close up shots of the elated expression on his face. Similarly when he is in the boxing ring, close up shots are used to show his foot tapping to the ballet music. His teacher quickly notes his raw talent and it also her determination and ambition on Billy's behalf that metaphorically opens a door to a new life for him. It is a possible escape from the mining environment that has trapped not only his father and brother but so many other previous generations of men.

Her unflinching support as teacher and mentor is pivotal for him to do well at the audition. Though outwardly a hard taskmaster, her genuine warmth and generosity of spirit is evident in many moments of visual and spoken humour. In one scene for example, while winking encouragement, she demands he, 'find a spot on that bloody wall and focus on that spot'. Her encouragement is offset by those who try to belittle his ambitions such as Mr Braithwaite, 'You look like a right wanker to me son.' This polarisation helps establish the tension in the first half of the film. After the audition however, the whole community rallies around the boy amid a buzz of anticipation as he awaits news of either success or failure, 'Have you heard anything yet?' Tension mounts as the letter arrives and Billy nervously retires into his room to read it in private giving nothing away as to its contents until the very last minute when the whole family troop in to hear, 'I got it.' Contextual resonance is created by his success being ironically countered by news that 'the union caved in yesterday' and that the miners would be going back to work.

Billy's love of dance and ambition to study ballet as a career challenges everything his patriarchal community endorses and yet, in their own ways, all the protagonists are struggling to achieve what they believe is right. For the miners it is a struggle to protect a harsh lifestyle because it is the only one they know, and for his teacher it is to do what she can to maximise Billy's chances of success. Male parochialism holds sway with socially endorsed gender expectations rigidly in place. This is a place where 'norms' are largely inflexible; where 'friggin ballet' is not countenanced as a suitable interest for a boy. The social and political context fuels family conflict in ways that are understandable to viewers as Daldry reinforced in an interview comment made shortly after the film's release, 'I suppose we all have experiences with problems with our family.' Billy's love of ballet over boxing, flies in the face of societal and gender expectations but it is the transformative impact his dogged determination to succeed has on members of his family and the community at large that becomes a central issue. When Billy finally heads off to London, the little girl who has been a recurring motif throughout the film is once again standing outside in the street. Unlike previous times however, she now voices a farewell as the Elliot men stride off, each coping in their own way with the stress of departure and what it might signal for the future.

Visual imagery links family members through dance, offering counter-point moments of joy and sorrow. The sheer exuberance of shots of him jumping, convey the enjoyment he gains from dance which is visually foregrounded as a central motif and used as book-end images for the film. Billy's love of dance began with his interest in watching old musical films, especially those of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Such films had been escapist for people coping with the economic adversity linked to the Great Depression which lasted in America up until the beginning of W.W.II. Daldry incorporates a film sequence where Billy's

movements are contrasted with a black and white clip of Fred Astaire. Initially, his dancing is a secretive and solitary activity, one scene using visual humour with inter-cutting parody shots as Billy dances in tune to a film clip of Fred Astaire's famous 'Top Hat' dance sequence. This visually links him to the famous dancer, as well as foreshadowing Billy's innate talent and undeveloped potential.

The secret lessons with his teacher in the community hall are evocatively lit, light streaming through the club windows and bathing everything in a soft indistinct haze. The punching bag shown swinging in the background and the boxing ring itself become props as they explore ideas for dance from what is 'special' to Billy including the letter from his mother which he knows off by heart. The key phrase 'always be yourself' sums up the underlying theme of the film. Even his hardnosed teacher is moved to comment that his mother must have been 'a very special kind of person'. Billy's blunt reply mirrors her pragmatism, 'not really, she was just me mam'. Though dead, his mother remains a powerful incentive for him to work hard to try and achieve his dreams. The teacher/student dance duo to 'I love to Boogie' by 'T Rex', is obviously enjoyed by both of them. For Billy, dance offers physical release, companionship and the rare freedom to express himself without rules or onlookers. Visual humour is added by Daldry's use of parallel editing of interspersed camera shots of other Elliot family members dancing to the same rhythm.

According to the film's choreographer, Peter Darling, 'The dancing had to be part of the narrative, telling us who he is.' A rigorous dance routine of eight hours a day for three months was required for the dance scenes, describing the dancing skills of the star who plays the part of Billy as 'fantastic because everything comes from the heart – there's a reason for every move'. In one early scene which is later echoed in the film, Billy is shown dancing up a steep, cobble stoned backstreet that reflects the confined uniformity of his existence. Ironically however it is back-dropped by a cloudless blue sky and sea. The evocative image of a single boat epitomises the potential of escape to another world far away from the coal black pits of the mining town.

The music and lyrics of British rock groups of the era, such as 'T-Rex', 'The Jam' and 'The Clash' provides the musical backdrop for some of the most breathtaking dance sequences. In one explosive scene, dance becomes an outlet for Billy's pent up rage, driven from the family home by his brother who has belittles him by calling him a 'sanctimonious little shit'. The camera focuses on him as he comes into sight over the crest of a hill that is also used several times in the film. As he comes into view, the tension builds alongside the audience empathy that has been triggered by the argument. A combination of overhead and close-up shots of his dancing feet are embedded within an asymmetrical shot of a terrace lined back street as other *mise en scene* elements keep the viewer focused on his movements as he vents his frustrations through dance.

Book-end shots of Billy jumping to the sounds of pop music establish and confirm that dance is the film's central motif. As shown in the scenes with his teacher, dance is how Billy externalises his feelings and expresses himself. As his skill develops, it begins to signify the only way he can escape the stultifying social environment that condemns and ridicules his artistic temperament. His dance sequences visually contrast the gritty, working class existence of Durham, as well as effectively highlighting many contextual issues that are developed within the film. His dancing also becomes a form of dialogue within the film as shown when his father discovers him rehearsing for his audition. His son walks right up to him and breaks into a furious jig a virtual challenge that yells in the face of his angry father's disapproval. Another underlying dance motif is the music of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake and the metaphorical imagery it represents. It becomes an important leitmotif, accompanying and charting Billy's development and relationship with characters such as his dancing teacher.

It also helps to meld disparate storylines of parable and fantasy with the reality of a strike bound mining community. It fuses the harsh realities of the current world with the artistic possibilities of the future. When Mrs Wilkinson tells Billy the story behind the ballet music, he is initially dismissive and unimpressed because it 'sounds crap'. Her description of it as a sort of ghost story where a woman 'becomes alive-she becomes real again' gains significance as it is the ballet used in the final moments of the film. The music is also representative of her being able to use Billy's chance of success as her last opportunity to come 'alive' again herself through him. His escape heralds that her thwarted hopes and talents have not been entirely wasted, evident in Billy's penultimate leap as principal in the Royal Ballet performance of 'Swan Lake'. Overcoming adversity through the redemptive power of dance helps heal family rifts and restore some semblance of community harmony.

## Gender Roles

Daldry explores firmly entrenched gender roles and stereotypes within Durham's patriarchal community. Billy's father and brother man the picket lines, while he attempts to care for his doddering grandmother. She is an unwitting ally, saying 'I used to go to ballet'. There is genuine warmth in their relationship, shown through his calm mannerisms and tone of voice when dealing with her tendency to wander or suffer from nightmares. In dealing with her encroaching senility, his gentleness and sensitivity counters the brutish rage and frustration shown in the clashes between miners and police. Much of the action takes place in the community hall which becomes representative of entrenched gender opinions and expectations. It is split, like the community itself, on strict gender lines with the men at one end and the women at the other.

Wearing his grandfather's old boxing gloves, Billy does fit the macho male role, getting knocked about in the ring. What the girls are doing in the nearby ballet class is far more appealing and the visual juxtaposition of boxing and ballet also foregrounds gender conflict within the film. Notions of masculinity are explored as determined miners on strike are set alongside images of Billy dancing, both parties equally determined to achieve their goals. Billy's father is adamantly set against his son doing ballet, and uses a number of strategies to try and set his son straight such as the idea that it is a family tradition, 'Listen. I boxed, me dad boxed, you box.' He also tries to use the gender line to embarrass him and make him feel guilty about wanting to do such a non-manly thing, describing ballet as being all right 'for your Nana, for girls. No, not for lads, Billy. Lads do football... or boxing... or wrestling. Not friggin ballet.'

He equates male ballet dancers with homosexuality, but Billy shows no overt signs of being gay, a fact discovered by his sudden embarrassment during a pillow fight with his friend Debbie where he rejects her sexual advances. Billy's best friend Michael however is clearly gay as well as cross-dresser who enjoys donning a tutu in one of the dance scenes. He is attracted to Billy but he does not reciprocate. Billy's sexuality is explored without resorting to clichéd stereotypes. The ambiguity of the sexual subtext is stressed by his assertion, 'Just because I like ballet, it doesn't mean I'm a poof.'

## Social Conflict

The soundtrack features segments from some of the protest music of the era including 'Town Called Malice' by 'The Jam'.

### Town Called Malice

Better stop dreaming of the quiet life -  
cos it's the one we'll never know  
And quit running for that runaway bus -  
cos those rosey days are few  
And - stop apologising for the things you've never done,  
Cos time is short and life is cruel -  
but it's up to us to change  
This town called malice.  
Rows and rows of disused milk floats  
stand dying in the dairy yard  
And a hundred lonely housewives clutch empty milk  
bottles to their hearts  
Hanging out their old love letters on the line to dry  
It's enough to make you stop believing when tears come  
fast and furious  
In a town called malice.

Struggle after struggle - year after year  
The atmosphere's a fine blend of ice -  
I'm almost stone cold dead  
In a town called malice.

A whole street's belief in Sunday's roast beef  
gets dashed against the Co-op  
To either cut down on beer or the kids new gear  
It's a big decision in a town called malice.

The ghost of a steam train - echoes down my track  
It's at the moment bound for nowhere -  
just going round and round  
Playground kids and creaking swings -  
lost laughter in the breeze  
I could go on for hours and I probably will -  
but I'd sooner put some joy back  
In this town called malice.

## Filial Conflict

Billy's mother Sarah has died of cancer the year before and everyone in the family misses her even if his father and brother try not to publicly show it. The passage of time is indicated by snow fall and other visual symbols of Christmas such as carols and decorations. Any sense of festive enjoyment however is shattered by images of splintering wood and Billy flinching from the savagery of his father's blows as he forced to destroy the mother's piano for winter fuel. This is a confronting reminder of the family's real plight as poverty makes everyday living difficult with no income coming in and nothing left to pawn. Everyone is on edge because the strike and the tangible loss of wife and mother which has left them with only a pitiful mockery of a festive family occasion. Her absence stresses the loss of family and Billy's aching sense of loss, prompts the question, after he has seen his mother's piano destroyed, 'Do you think she'll mind'.

His father feels inadequate, unable to give them signs of his love, 'No big presents, no bright tree, no well, no mother. Where was my lovely Sarah now we all need her?' Billy wants to talk about his mother but is silenced by what he sees as indifference in his father and brother, 'I don't think anyone remembers my mam except for me anymore. I miss her, I miss her everyday.' And yet the father's harsh response to his son's questions 'shut up Billy. She's dead' only increases pity for this man struggling to keep his family together. The scene is accompanied by the discordant sound of strings and the later image of the father sobbing uncontrollably while we hear the words 'Merry Christmas everybody.' Such juxtaposition is incredibly powerful.

The situation is not helped by the obvious friction between Jackie and Tony based on the lack of money and the ongoing strike. They cannot see eye to eye about the situation and rarely talk without irritation. Jackie is not inherently aggressive, and from Tony's perspective is viewed as 'going soft' but unlike his son, he cannot condone the protest violence believing that it is 'not going to get us anywhere.' Tony has an explosive temper and verbally lashes out at everyone, abusing his brother for touching his records or any of his possessions, 'He's an idiot, my brother, I hate him.' His antagonist closes off another avenue for Billy to confer with someone other than his teacher about what he wants to do. When she challenges his animosity, he grabs hold of Billy and dumps him on the table demanding, 'Dance you little twit! No? Right, so get lost.'

The grief and frustration that fuels his antagonism is defused by sight of his father's weeping face as he takes his place on the 'scab' bus and admits, 'Seeing my dad like that made me feel different.' Tony realises that he must step up and be proactively supportive of both his father and his brother. His attitude begins to change and he gains new awareness of what is important and what can be done to bring the family together by supporting the only member who has some real chance to make something of himself. While he and his father have never gone beyond their town, Billy has a chance to excel on the world stage and as it does with Mrs Wilkinson, he is liberated by the chance to help rather than hinder his brother's efforts. This liberates him from a seething anger that had blinkered his outlook and blocked any possibility of his being able to regain control of his life. As happened in so many mining towns during the strike, it had to be admitted, 'A strike like this breaks some families in half and brings others together.' Although initially, this seemed impossible in the fractured Elliot family, Billy's dancing creates an opportunity that brings family and even community together.

## Characterisation

### Billy

Billy is the main carer for his often addled grandmother who has a tendency to wander off, adding moments of simultaneously tragic/comic relief to the domestic turbulence of the Eliot household. Billy loves his Nana shown by his unstinting patience with her, 'It's me – It's Billy. Her frequent refrain that she 'could have been a professional' reinforces the central idea of missed opportunities and thwarted dreams. The boy's interest in ballet begins fortuitously when having failed to impress his boxing coach and taunted for moving 'like a fanny in a fit', he stops to watch the dancing girls. Described as being 'a disgrace to those boxing gloves and the traditions of this boxing hall' he is also drawn by the music of Mr Braithwaite. The camera reinforces his failure in one area with an instinctive affinity for another. His natural sense of rhythm is more in tune with their ballet movements than with the swinging punching bag he fails to hit.

He gravitates from one to the other, goaded by the teacher's challenge, 'Go on. I dare yer.' His natural poise, rhythm, focus and energy soon make him stand out from the others. While he admits, 'I feel like a right sissy' he is obviously more at ease dancing than in the boxing ring. Rapid progress results from the private lessons he risks taking. Fleeting shots of his mother are seamlessly embedded into the narrative; her letter emphasising the tragic impact of her death on the family. His artistic interests are shown through repeated shots of him picking out tunes on his mother's piano, linking him to her and to music. At first he makes constant mistakes but he gradually improves, better able to pick up the tune which is carried over into the accompanying musical refrain.

He finds it hard to articulate his feelings and dance provides the only real means of personal expression. Revolving shots that move around him as he practices emphasise his growing skill and precision. His drive is emphasised when his teacher confronts his family on his behalf, explaining that dancing means everything to him; 'I don't want a childhood, I want to be a ballet dancer! He has courageously challenged social norms and expectations as well as risking the scorn, disapproval and anger of his father and brother. Viewers are encouraged to empathise with his mounting frustration and rebellious defiance. Dance might be his only outlet but occasionally, Mrs Wilkinson's pressure and criticism outweigh even that joy, forcing him to cry out defiantly, 'No' while police sirens sound in the background. She is apologetic but he vents his spleen, 'You're the same as everyone else. You just want to tell me what to do.' He lashes out at the very person who has supported him, 'don't pick on me cause you fucked up your own life.'

Such emotional outbursts add credibility to his characterisation, especially when he finds himself under enormous pressure after his audition. This is shown when another boy tries to reassure him and is aggressively rebuffed by Billy as a 'bent bastard'. When he returns, the very community he had challenged with such determination, now rallies around him in a buzz of anticipation, keen to hear the news, 'have you heard anything yet?' When the letter arrives, Billy nervously retires to his room to read it, giving nothing away until the whole family troops in to hear 'I got it.' Although the good news is soured by news, 'the union caved in yesterday', Billy has escaped the mines. His success literally and metaphorically becomes a beacon of hope in an otherwise, seemingly hopeless social environment.

## Jackie Elliot

A macho unionist backdrop forms the context for Daldry's skilful depiction of the brutal and dehumanising nature of mining. It dictates Jackie's actions and outlook for much of the film as well as the tensions of a changing world where former attitudes and values no longer seem applicable. He is under enormous pressure, trying to cope with the loss of his wife, the economic and union pressures from the strike. Both sons however, are dealing with personal problems of their own and they challenge their father's authority and push him to breaking point. Jackie tries to prevent Tony from getting involved in sabotaging mining company equipment but as the argument escalates to blows, Tony also lashes out with an abusive taunt, 'You're finished. Since mum died you're nothing but a useless twat.'

This only compounds his father's sense of worthlessness, augmented by his initial incredulity as his son wanting to become a ballet dancer. He storms explosively into the ballet class demanding, 'You. Out. Now'. As a man in a harsh man's world, he is initially incredulous about his son's love of 'friggin Ballet' which from his perspective is not 'perfectly normal'. Unable to articulate his feelings, he punishes Billy, 'From now on you stay here and look after your Nanna'. This not only shows the father's insensitivity but triggers the eruption of Billy's pent up fury, 'I hate you. You're a bastard.'

Finding Billy and Michael in the club marks a key turning point; his confused facial expressions showing his struggle to make sense of the situation. Billy expressed himself through dance and feels rejected when his father walks away and yet against all expectations, his father decides to seek advice from Mrs Wilkinson. His gruff refusal of her offer of a loan to help him pay for the necessary fare shows his fierce independence, 'I didn't come here to be patronised'. He asserts his authority, 'I will handle this myself.' Despite feelings of personal failure and disillusionment, the recognition of his son's individuality and potential, ends up giving his father renewed purpose in life. No longer seen as a social pariah, Billy's artistic aspirations become a cathartic symbol of hope and a better future for his father.

An emotional gauntlet must be faced by both father and son if Billy is to find his escape route out of Durham. Just as his son has had to break with tradition and challenge social norms, his father must walk away from his fellow miners and cross the picket line. He is mocked and scorned, 'Who's the big man now?' The staunch unionist shows inner resilience and makes the switch to resolute father. Changed convictions are evidenced by confronting shots of yelling faces and wire reinforced windows that are needed to protect Jackie and the other strike breakers on the bus from rocks pelted by former workmates. This momentous shift from loyal union man is conveyed by Tony's confusion and outraged sense of betrayal at what his father has done. Jackie had formerly condemned backsliders, declaring that the 'first rule of the Union Gary; you never cross a picket line'.

Tony cannot comprehend his father's actions and tries to plead with him, 'You can't do this'. Jackie struggles to articulate his motivation for doing the unthinkable, 'It's my wee boy. He may be a fucking genius for all we know... let's give the boy a chance.' Their mutual decision to give Billy the '100% support' he needs begins the healing process. His wife's jewellery is pawned and combined with community fund raising and going back to work when the strike is broken, generates the money needed. As 'dancing boy' heads over the crest of the hill down toward the bus depot, *mise-en-scène* elements frame their departing figures while Tony calls out, 'stop being an old fuckin' woman'. Billy is surprised to learn that his father had never travelled beyond Durham, expressed with dry humour as being because there are 'no mines in London' to which his son replies, 'Is that all you think about?' Just before Billy is ready to leave, we see father and son laughing and able to express their affection for each other. Billy admits 'I'm scared' to which his father is now able to reply, 'It's O.K. We're all scared', affirming the film's message that taking risks and going out to meet the world head on, always requires great courage and determination.



## Tony

'Our Tony' lacks Billy's sensitivity and for the bulk of the film is belligerent and outspoken. He shows his support for the strike by vandalising company property, 'to fight back for once'. He feels trapped in a situation that has little chance for expansion or growth and he has replaced family kinship with the desperate camaraderie of union rebellion. Over time, his aggressiveness is recognised as brash bravado. Harsh expletives such as 'twat' and 'knobhead' highlighting sibling rivalry which persist until his father joins the scabs to get the money needed for Billy's audition. At the bus depot, he is even able to say, 'I will miss you Billy', and Billy's desperate attempts to communicate with him in return, show a healing of fractured filial bonds. The poignancy of the last good-byes is achieved by parallel editing with shots of the empty ballet room and Billy on the bus. Daldry has described the film as being 'about leaving your family and the bittersweet element of growing out and growing up and moving on.' Ironically, it is Tony in the final scene who prompts his father to hurry so they will not miss Billy's starring ballet role in 'Swan Lake'. By leaving home, Billy has achieved his goal.

## Mrs Wilkinson

Billy's mentor is so strict that she demands even Debbie to call her 'Miss'. She is as much a prisoner of her community as the miners are but she quickly recognises Billy's talent. She cajoles, encourages and at times, bullies him to work hard and learn the skills he will need to reach the highest standards. She is forceful and demanding, criticising him, 'you're not even trying' which is challenged by the film's visual imagery which stresses his determination. She refuses to tolerate any slacking or 'shite' from any of her pupils and as 'the bloody teacher' she taps into her own skills to develop his innate sense of rhythm. She also tries to improve his sense of balance and movement in the disciplined movements required by classical ballet. This is an enormous learning curve for her as well because has to push herself in order to be the mentor he needs. She may not be fully qualified ballet instructor but she understands 'how you move and express yourself, that's what's important.'

Blousy, tough-talking and uncultured she is exactly what he needs however, because she understands his situation and what she must be able to achieve is he is to move beyond the confines of Durham. Even when he asks her, 'Miss, Yer don't fancy me do yer?' she is able to keep a straight face and reply, 'Strangely enough I don't.' Her chain smoking and domineering character is not sentimentalised in any way but she put aside the disillusionment of her own failed dreams to work doggedly to improve the innate talents of her protégé. She is sardonic and forceful enough to keep Billy focused but also hopeful, even when his father seems likely to demand that he up dancing, she prompts rebellion, and 'You should stand up to him.' Her alcoholic, retrenched husband resents her newfound purpose, sneeringly sarcastic in calling Billy, 'Durham's little Gene Kelly.' By contrast, she earns viewer admiration and respect for her selfless efforts to help Billy at least have a fighting chance of doing well at his audition.

Mrs Wilkinson is pragmatically resilient and tough enough to confront Jackie Elliot on Billy's behalf saying, he has missed 'a very important audition.' She stands her ground, stressing her concern is for Billy and 'not for my gratification when Tony's demands, 'Who the fuck are you?' Muted sound throws visual focus on Billy's reactions as these important adults in his life, jockey for moral dominance. She fights for him to have a chance, determined to do her best for him and yet is not effusive when he calls in at the class to tell her he has been accepted. When he goes to thank her and give his farewells, she remains undemonstrative but as always, gives sound counsel, 'You go out and find life and all those other things.' She is rejuvenated by her relationship with Billy for in playing a major role in his life she has rediscovered a pivotal part of herself which will make her future less bleak.

## Film Style

Lee Hall's script captures the social tension and the miner's plight. Fast paced British slang and the broad working class accents authenticate the contextual background as does the use of British rock music tunes by groups like T-Rex. Frequent crossing scenes show the dispute, riots and violent confrontations and these are juxtaposed with shots of Billy dancing. The unifying dance and music motif is used in the montage scene where Tony dashes away from the law while Billy dances to the rock classic 'London Calling' by 'The Clash' which can be heard in the background. The two main storylines of dance and union protest are linked by inter-cutting/parallel editing along with shots of police and the background sounds of police sirens. This foregrounds the political and economic context and reinforces the impact it has on the Elliot family and the other miners. Even the spatial proximity of ballet class and adjoining boxing ring is directly due to the strike because the ballet section of the hall is currently being used as a 'soup kitchen for the striking miners'.

Social context is kept uppermost in the viewer's consciousness by constant switching between Billy's dancing and the strike. In one scene, a background radio news broadcast reporting on the government's strike breaking determination is also heard while we focus on Billy and his family. Inferential visuals are also used to maintain the audience's awareness of the broader political context. This is powerfully achieved in the scene when Billy and Debbie walk home and she is shown casually dragging a stick against the wall. This is suddenly replaced by another wall but this time it is made up of riot police Perspex shields. This is a jarring, visual image that stresses that their town has become a virtual war zone and the police presence has become so much a part of community life, that she doesn't even break stride. She fails to notice them as they remain motionless at their posts but innovative camerawork conveys the threatening contextual message without being overtly politicised.

The director has described how they used an entirely different approach 'for the dance scenes' where they 'shifted the perspective to encompass a wider, more open frame which was to enhance the feeling that Billy was breaking free of his surrounding constraints. We shot in the way they did in the 1930s for Fred Astaire's movies. When Billy ventures out of his town to the audition we wanted full emotional impact so we shot much more sky to show that his world was opening up.' Unusual camera angles and techniques are also used to embed social commentary into the film's narrative framework. Children are portrayed as innocent victims who find themselves caught up in tense situations of sustained and violent conflict. Slow motion is used to show jostling torsos, beating shields and charging horses which also ramps up the sense of real danger. Cinematography visually reinforces core issues such as the overhead crane shot showing the surging battlelines of armed police and strikers.

It is also used effectively to highlight Billy's disorientation when ballerinas are shown going down a circular stairwell while Billy looks up. Recurring visual motifs and figures become narrative lynchpins such as the little girl who always seems to be in the laneway outside Billy's cottage. She seems a lonely, representative figure of children growing up in such industrial working class communities where opportunities and expectations are extremely limited. Recurring motifs such as an unseen barking dog or the hunched figure of Billy's grandmother are used to link various strands of the story. The old woman is powerless, watching the family tension happening around her but unable to do anything about it. Other informative visual images include Billy and Michael in class and the amusing sidestep of both father and son when scared by the barking dog as they approach Mrs Wilkinson's door. Such motifs give visual unity to the film while helping link the parallel storylines.

## Key Scenes

### Audition / interview

Billy's working class background is juxtaposed with the sophisticated elegance of the Royal Ballet in shots of the perfectly symmetrical staircase and the low angle shot of the building's magnificent skylight. This foreign environment intimidates Billy who says, 'Dad, I've changed me mind'. Jackie meanwhile seems fascinated by the ornate balustrades and the dancing figures he watches and orders Billy back in to get on with it. Mise en scene framing makes the audition panel visually intimidating as Billy is called to the bar to begin. Alternating shots of the apprehensive performer and nervous parent outside are emphasised by the non committal glances of the panel as they watch Billy's bizarre routine. His innate sensitivity is overwhelmed by a sense of failure and the belief that it has all been 'a waste of fucking time', shown when he hits a fellow dancer who asks how he had gone. It is ironic that he is reprimanded for violent behaviour by the panel given that viewers know this is not typical of him.

The judge concludes; 'I'm afraid that mutual respect and self discipline are absolute prerequisites for every student in this school' and that Billy's outburst is 'bound to affect our final decision.' Visual imagery also exaggerate Billy's belligerence by his aggressive posture of folded arms and frowning expression. One judge shows more insight than her peers and questions him further about what dance means to him. His father supportively says, 'he dances all the time' and even the judges admit that his teacher had written a most 'enthusiastic letter' of encouragement. The moments stretch out as Billy struggles to express his feelings. Eventually, after struggling to find the words, he gives a disjointed reply; 'I forget everything- sort of disappear... I feel a change in my whole body- fire, like a bird, like electricity.' This is probably the longest sustained piece of dialogue Billy has in the entire film and it captures the transformation that comes over him when he dances.

### Finale

The bus drives off and the next scene is set ten years later, shown by how Jackie and Tony have aged and still overwhelmed by the big city escalators and in-door plumbing. Such visual gags emphasise the cultural divide between the city and small mining towns. Here to attend a performance of 'Swan Lake' where Billy is the male lead, the fairy-tale motif has come full circle with the gawky miner's lad transformed into a star performer. He has grown, matured and his dancing prowess makes him a majestic, powerful and awe-inspiring figure. Michael, the boyhood friend is also in the audience which helps link past and present. His comment 'I wouldn't have missed it for the world' affirms Billy's struggle to reach his goals. The back shot of his powerful torso and the respect shown by others in the cast and production team, speak volumes for Billy's artistic achievements.

The tear streaked eyes of his father who watches with utter amazement and pride at the man his boy has become also stresses the transition between boy and man, dream and realisation. As the music swells, Billy makes his entry in an enormous leap at which point the film ends. It is significant that this version of 'Swan Lake' has an all-male cast and the lead swan who is a dangerous and hypnotically attractive figure seduces the prince. Billy's starring role therefore challenges traditional expectations just as the film has done on a societal level. This is a fitting way to round off a story of growth and maturation and as the credits roll, shots of Billy jumping are again shown but this time to the accompanying lyrics; 'If I believe I can do anything. I can spread my wings... nothing can stand in your way.'

# Billy Elliot

## Personal Response

### What is being said?

1. Describe and contrast the two contexts of Billy's world, noting how effectively the director juxtaposes the mining community with dance.
2. What humorous touches are used to personalise the film narrative of human endurance, determination and courage?
3. What links to the Module elective can be found in the film? What key scenes best represent these links cinematically?
4. What role is played by the prevailing social values and context in developing key themes in the films?
5. Billy's conflict is two-fold, in addition to practicing an art most of his peers regard as being for "poofs," chasing his dream will also mean cracking the class barrier as well as societal gender stereotyping.
6. Identify a scene in *Billy Elliot* and a film you viewed that showed the main character's internal change
7. In what ways does Billy's struggle echo that of the mining strikers?
8. Evaluate the song lyrics of 'Town of Malice' to consider how it echoes issues addressed in the film. You could also consider as a contemporaneous protest song that could perhaps be used as a related text.

### How is it being said?

1. With close reference to two key scenes, discuss the effectiveness of film techniques such as intercutting in delineating and developing characterisation and themes.
2. How does the film invite audience empathy and identification with the film's protagonists in struggling with major changes in their lives?
3. What cinematic techniques are used to evoke Billy's personal dilemmas and how he learns to deal with difficult social and filial issues?
4. How do these dance sequences produce a sense of spontaneity and authentic atmosphere?
5. In what ways do the lyrics reflect the elective focus developed within the film?