

Meet the new jeté set: How boys are smashing the ballet stereotype

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With Prince George taking ballet lessons at his new school, Olivia Gordon catches up with some of the other young boys breaking every stereotype to change the face of British ballet

It's Sunday morning and in a bright studio at the Royal Academy of Dance in London, 20 eager young ballet dancers aged between seven and ten are pirouetting across the floor.

But there's not a tutu in sight, the children's ballet shoes are black or white rather than pink and as they turn they're imagining they're in the video game Angry Birds rather than pretending to be butterflies or fairies. This is a ballet masterclass just for boys. And it's been sold out for weeks.



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Boys' ballet is booming. Thanks to spellbinding stars such as Carlos Acosta boys have been outnumbering girls in some schools



The boys dancing to 'Singin' in the Rain'



Pupils at London Boys Ballet School practise their *port de bras*

WHY WE LOVE BALLET

by pupils and parents from the Royal Academy of Dance

Lara Eschler de Ris, from Cambridge: 'We started baby ballet when Tristan was little, with lots of girls wearing pink tutus, and naturally, he wasn't joining in. Then he did ballet at after-school club, but he was aware he was the only boy. Doing an RAD boys ballet class has been really helpful.'

Tristan, 7: 'I like moving. I like ballet a lot.'



Lara Eschler de Ris, from Cambridge, with Tristan, 7



Jill Jarvis, from Surrey, with Scott. Right, Scott in a class

Jill Jarvis, from Surrey: 'After a musical theatre class, the teacher told us: "You've got a dancer on your hands." It's not easy being a boy dancer at school sometimes – Scott was teased a bit. But he told his class Rio Ferdinand does ballet and that helped.'

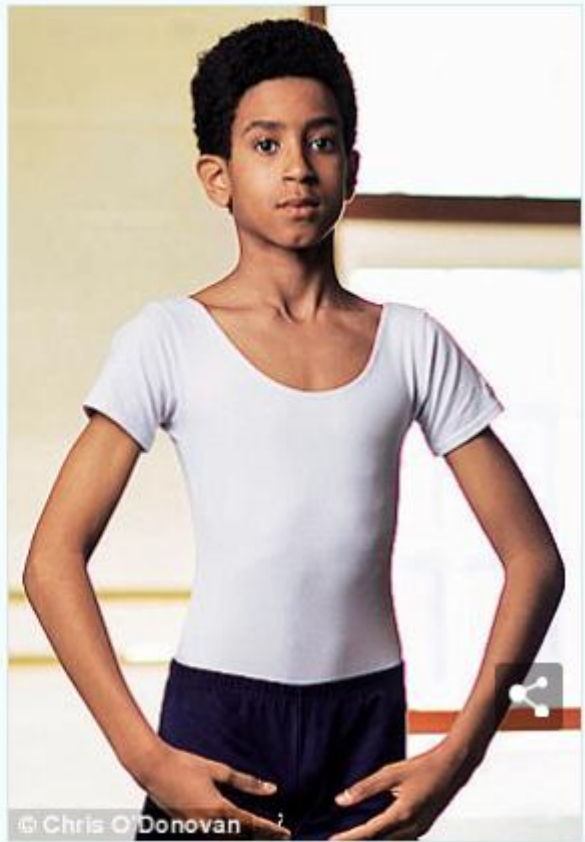
Scott, 10: 'From when I was little, I always wanted to dance.'

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Solomon Okorefe, from London: 'For me it's not a shock – I've always wanted to see more boys doing ballet. The taboo of it just being a girls' dance is outdated. Jaad is also top in his class at rugby and that's because of his ballet.'

Jaad, 10: 'It all started at the age of two when I watched The Nutcracker at the theatre and loved it. I started ballet classes when I was four. I like how when you're dancing you can just zone out. It's amazing. I wouldn't think of doing anything else in the world.'



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Solomon Okorefe with Jaad, and Jaad practicing ballet (right)

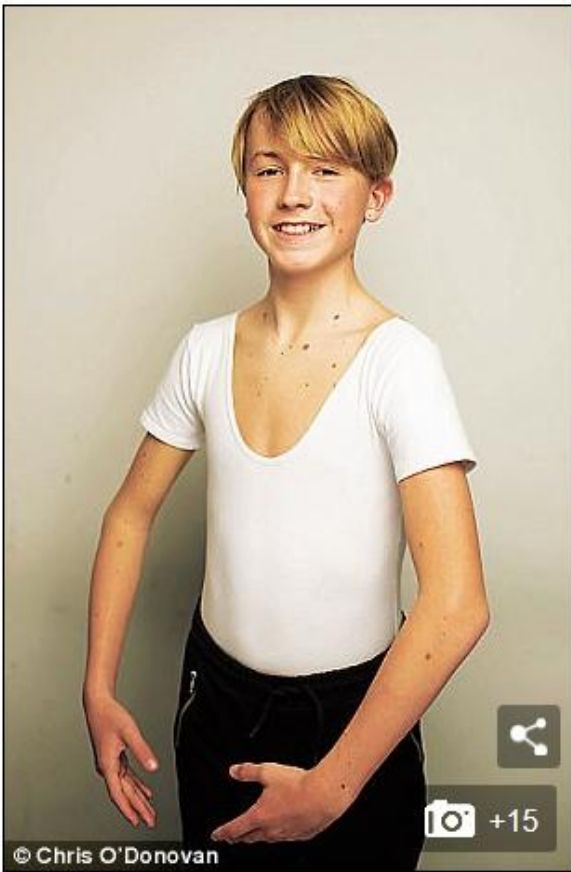
Boys' ballet is booming. In 2000 the hit film *Billy Elliot* brought it into the mainstream – but Billy was the only boy in a class of ballerinas. Today, thanks to spellbinding stars such as Carlos Acosta, male stars on *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Britain's Got Talent* and footballers and rugby players using ballet to hone their strength and agility, boys have been outnumbering girls at The Royal Ballet School for some years.

As Darcey Bussell remarked, 'Suddenly male dancers have become this extraordinary talent and we can't get enough of them.' This summer Barreworks' studio in Richmond launched Lifting the Barre, London's first barre class for men. Meanwhile, Britain's first centre for boys' ballet, the London Boys Ballet School (LBBS), has seen remarkable growth since it was founded two years ago by dancer James Anthony. Having started with just a handful of pupils, the school now boasts more than 170, aged between four and 18, who travel from all over the South East to attend on Saturdays and after school.

Growing up in South Wales, James 'always secretly wanted to dance', but at school ballet was seen as 'girly', which put him off. He only started ballet classes in his early 20s. It struck him that if he'd been able to learn as a child at a ballet school for boys, he wouldn't have felt so isolated and self-conscious.



LBBS's founder James Anthony (left), and artistic adviser Andrew Ward (right)



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Ellis (left), Casper (right)



© Chris O'Donovan



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Alistair (left) and Freddie (right)

Since James set up LBBS he has been amazed by its momentum: 'It's just growing and growing,' he says. He recently took on former Boston Ballet soloist Andrew Ward as artistic adviser and ballet icon Wayne Sleep as ambassador. This autumn James plans to open a second boys-only school, in Birmingham. He will also be rolling out ballet workshops for boys in primary schools around the country from September.

Meanwhile, the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) – which launched boys-only masterclasses around the country in 2014 and also runs two-day workshops called Boys Only! – has seen an increase of more than 20 per cent in the numbers taking part in its boys' ballet activities in the past year alone. The schemes are led by RAD's male dance ambassador, the Birmingham Royal Ballet's principal Iain Mackay. This summer RAD launched Project B, a plan to boost boys' ballet, with an initial investment of more than £30,000 over the next three years. As part of the scheme, RAD is piloting workshops in primary schools to encourage more boys to dance (and, in partnership with Marylebone Cricket Club, more girls to play cricket).

Although ballet conjures images of ethereal ballerinas in gossamer tutus, there is nothing intrinsically feminine about it. In Russia and Cuba there has never been stigma about being a male ballet dancer, yet the stereotype of ballet as female has proven hard to shake off in the UK.

Many of the boys at the LBBS and RAD masterclasses have tales of being teased for liking ballet. Alistair and Casper, both eight, are schoolfriends who go to LBBS after football practice on Saturdays. 'We're the only two boys in our class that do ballet,' says Alistair, who wants to 'be a football player and a ballet dancer' when he grows up. Casper adds: 'Some think it's a bit girlish.' Alistair says: 'Some people giggle when I wear my ballet jumper to school.' Casper grins: 'I just ignore them.'

James also runs a mixed ballet school in South Wales. There he finds it harder to get boys interested. But, overall, 'the stigma is decreasing', James says. 'We're trying really hard to change it.'



© Chris O'Donovan



For many boys at LBBS, the class is the highlight of their week. 'It's like he has found his tribe,' one mum says



© Chris O'Donovan



Pupils don't have to wear ballet shoes or leotards - trainers and tracksuits are fine if they feel more comfortable



As the class progresses, the boys strike up friendships and brim with exuberance and delight

The LBBS branding is graphic and modern – no pink in sight – and the teaching at both RAD and LBBS is designed to chime with its male pupils. Leading a masterclass, Iain Mackay asks the boys to imagine they are superheroes, soldiers, ninjas, rock guitarists, robots, zombies and characters in computer games such as Minecraft and films such as *Transformers*. They respond with verve, channelling hot lava exploding out of a volcano, darts or slingshots flying, pistons pumping, soldiers chasing the enemy. It's vital, Iain says afterwards, to tap into the boys' interests and allow them to lead.

Pupils don't have to wear ballet shoes or leotards, he adds – trainers and tracksuits are fine if they feel more comfortable. Iain wears these himself when teaching masterclasses.

Boys are also engaged by the emphasis placed on ballet as a tough sport. 'Do you know what male ballet dancers are?' Iain asks his group. 'We're a lot stronger and more flexible than any other athlete.' He tells them how he has taught ballet to rugby players, compares their strong legs to football goalposts, and gets them to flex their biceps while dancing to Sergei Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. When introducing the pirouette, he asks, 'Is anyone brave enough to show one?'

The boys couldn't ask for a cooler, more masculine role model and they hang on his every word. When Iain asks his students who is the only boy in their local ballet class, most shoot up their hands. A little boy with fair hair and glasses pipes up: 'I want to know I'm not the only boy who does ballet!'

Iain tells them that, growing up in Glasgow, 'I didn't have another boy in my class until I was 15. I thought I was the only boy in the world who did ballet.'

As the class progresses, the boys strike up friendships and brim with exuberance and delight. 'It's like he has found his tribe,' one mother, Jill Jarvis, smilingly observes of her ten-year-old son Scott.

Parents aren't forcing their sons to do ballet. Overwhelmingly, says James, it's the boys who choose it. Many parents tell him the class is their son's favourite part of the week and that they've never seen him so happy.

Jessica Mathur, from London, brings her nine- and seven-year-old sons to classes at LBBS. They started the classes after she and her eldest, Roshan, saw a YouTube video of the Ukrainian ballet dancer Sergei Polunin. 'Shall I do that, Mummy?' Roshan asked. 'I was more than willing,' says Jessica, 'but I knew if he walked into a room full of girls in tutus he'd turn on his heels and run.' So she looked for a school for boys and was 'thrilled' to find LBBS. 'It's a lovely contrast to all the traditionally boyish activities they do,' Jessica says. 'They enjoy it so much; it's physically demanding and it teaches them discipline.'



The Royal Academy of Dance's male dance ambassador Iain Mackay

Two of LBBS's most dedicated young stars are Freddie, ten, and Ellis, 12. When Freddie talks about why he loves ballet, his face lights up. 'It gets you moving, but not in a rough-and-tumble way,' he explains. 'My family encourage me because they want me to believe in myself and not think people are going to make fun of me.'



The boys in Iain's class taking inspiration from Spider Man



Even if a boy isn't destined for a dance career, ballet offers a superb all-round education in culture, sport, social awareness and mental and physical discipline

Ellis spends 90 minutes each way travelling from the south coast to LBBS every Saturday, taking part in one class after another from 8.45am until 5pm. He got into ballet after being taken to see a dance show when he was seven. 'I said to my mum: "I want to do that,"' he says. Ellis thinks more boys should try ballet: 'We have to get away from the stereotypes and show the manly side of ballet.'

When LBBS's artistic adviser Andrew Ward attended the Royal Ballet School in the 1970s he was one of only four boys there. It's 'heartening' to see a new generation of boys getting into ballet, Andrew says. 'Society has moved on. It's important that boys start dancing as men right from the beginning. If two boys are in a class of 30 girls they'll learn to do delicate port de bras, but they need to be broad.'

Even if a boy isn't destined for a dance career, ballet offers a superb all-round education in culture, sport, social awareness and mental and physical discipline, Iain stresses. As a father of two young sons, he has noticed at birthday parties that 'the first kids that are up dancing are the boys. That enthusiasm gets lost along the way somehow.'

Growing up, Iain was teased for doing ballet. 'I don't know any male dancer who wasn't. A lot of boys could be great at ballet but they don't have the confidence because they get teased at school. Inevitably some give up.'

Of course, it's those who don't let any prejudice stop them and persist with their dancing who are the toughest of all. 'A lot of girls go to ballet because it's the expected thing,' says James, 'but these boys are so passionate because they've made the decision to come, against what anyone else might say.'

boysballetlondon.com; rad.org.uk/projectb