ISSUE OF THE ISSUE

Boys in Dance

Boys: Your country needs you

by Ismene Brown,
dance critic, The Daily Telegraph.

How is British ballet to deal with the famine of boys? Recently the English National Ballet tried to answer this with a special open day in London's South Bank Centre offering the public the chance to bring their sons - of all ages - to try out dance class.

ENB's director Derek Deane believes things are desperate, that the shortage of British boys coming into dance threatens the future of ballet itself in this country.

'We are so short of interested boys that we are not going to produce the level of dancers that Great Britain was famous for: the Dowells, the David Walls of this world. I don't see any dancers of their ilk now. All the boys in my company are foreign. And look at the Royal Ballet - your Tetsuya Kumakawa, your Irek Mukhamdedov, your Zoltan Solymosi. Without an enormous new drive to interest boys in dance, we are going to have a very difficult time making ends meet as far as males are concerned.'

It used to be prejudice against men in tights that was the problem: now, says Deane, even more damaging is a frightening apathy among youngsters towards physical exercise and a chaotic and inadequate provision of dance classes around the country.

The ENB's open day, called 'Striking a Balance', did attract some very enthusiastic boys who had only just discovered ballet. Most of them were black or mixed-race and came from urban housing estates. A similarly high proportion of black and mixed-race children emerged on the Royal Ballet's 'A Chance to Dance' scheme run in the schools of two London boroughs. White boys were very much the minority.

I spoke to James, a sturdy, loose-limbed 13-year-old from Leytonstone who was engrossed in his Game Boy while he waited for the action to start. A few minutes later he told me in a quiet voice. 'I saw Swan Lake once. I loved it. I'd like to dance it.'

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But there were no black dancers in the production and to him and his dance-keen friends that was an even bigger stumbling block than finding money for classes, or the mickey-taking they got at school when they volunteered to take part in the ENB project.

James and his friends, Roy, Quba and John, all 13, said some boys had been sufficiently intimidated by the name-calling to pull out of the dance course. There had been bullying and fights in the playground. Quba said: 'It's because it's new that they pick on you - but it's not worth giving this up just because someone says something bad to you.' I asked John, from Ilford, why he liked dancing. He said it was because he could 'take all my anger out' in dancing. Anger? Against those who called him names.

Apart from James, none of the East London boys had seen any ballet. They watched 'Come Dancing' and ice-skating championships on television, some of them went to disco and ballroom classes - yet they still wanted to try out ballet.

There's been a lot of argument about whether dance's place in the school curriculum should be under PE - as it is - or not. Some argue that dance is an art and shouldn't be tied up with sport and athleticism. Nadine Senior knows all about that. She was the PE teacher at a middle school in Leeds for 15 years - Harehills Middle School - from which no fewer than 35 professional dancers eventually emerged - all but two of them boys.

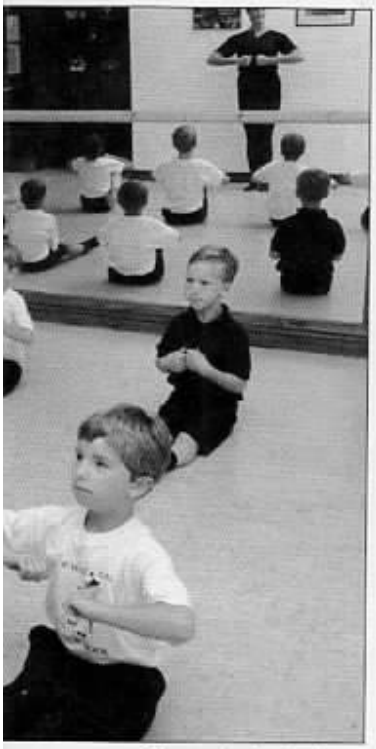
Many of them were black, and a group of them after secondary school, formed the Phoenix Dance Company, a very successful all-black contemporary dance company currently preparing to perform at Sadler's Wells. (October 17-21).

Mrs Senior, now principal of the Northern School of Contemporary Dance in Leeds, says it was thanks to dance being compulsory under the PE curriculum that the boys found out how much they liked doing it. 'In most schools dance is an option. Boys don't opt for dance, they only get interested once they're involved. Dance improved their hurdling and athletic co-ordination, but I also took them to the theatre to see London Contemporary Dance Theatre, and Namron, who was one of the LCDT principals originally from the Caribbean. The children idolised LCDT'

That kind of enthusiasm among young children is an attitude that Derek Deane would kill to find in boys actually coming into dance schools at 16. Unlike girls, boys can get away with a late start.

'In my own school, English National Ballet school, I am finding it difficult to get even three or four boys with the talent and attitude to go on to a career.

'Yes, it's worse here in Britain. The Germans and Russians are producing good boy dancers, the French and the Italians too. Why? I don't know the answer. I think a lot of it is luck and a lot of it is training. We don't take training seriously here, for boys or girls, from an early



enough age. In Paris they have people working seriously from the age of eight. I don't think our Mary's Saturday morning class once a week is enough. Our methods and standards of training are not up to scratch.'

Parents, too, are a crucial factor. As the Royal Ballet's education officer Darryl Jaffray pointed out, they do the ferrying around, the chivvying to practise, the kit-washing, the paying of the fees. Not even the keenest child can persevere with out that support, and there's still a reluctance among fathers, in particular, to encourage their sons to join a female-dominated profession.

But maybe the worst problem is our complacency. Says Deane: 'Theatre and dance are two dying races because people aren't letting children go out to discover things for themselves. It's so much easier to slump back and switch on the TV. We are allowing television and computer games to ruin our culture.

Although the BBC has been showing more dance recently only a lucky visit to their school from an ENB or Royal Ballet team will prevent them spending the rest of their life seeing ballet as daft or elitist. ■