

Billy Elliot Showcases Talented Dancers



Billy Elliot: The Musical makes its professional RI debut kicking-off Ocean State Theatre Company's fifth season. Winner of 10 Tony Awards, this production, under OSTC's artistic director Amiee Turner, shows some flashes of the brilliance that has earned it so much critical acclaim, but ultimately falls short of delivering a knock-out punch.

During its final preview performance (the last chance to work out the kinks before opening night) the show clocked in at about 3 hours, including intermission; hopefully it will tighten up a bit before opening night. While Act I does breeze along, Act II gets bogged down and seems fragmented with some clumsy transitions from one scene to the next.

There are also several lengthy dance sequences featuring strobe lights and blaring music that seem misplaced and out of context. But, if the intent was simply to showcase 12-year-old Matthew Dean (Billy Elliot), then these numbers were a rousing success.

Dean first started dancing in his mother's dance studio when he was just 2 years old. At age 9, he became a competitive gymnast. But he is just getting started in theater. He first appeared in a children's theater version of *Billy Elliot* and began singing 6 months ago. But, according to OSTC's director of marketing and public relations Karen Gail Kessler, "he is definitely hooked," and, if this production is any indication, not only is Dean a quick study, he is going to be a star.

For those unfamiliar with the story, it takes place during the British coal miner's strike of 1984-85; a strike that created tremendous civil unrest and led to a severe decline in the coal industry resulting in the loss of about 20,000 jobs. Meanwhile, while his brother and father are out walking the picket line, a young Billy Elliot decides to trade in his boxing gloves for a pair of ballet slippers. With the absence of a mother and growing up in the testosterone filled home of coal miners, Billy's decision leads to some pretty heated exchanges, all fearing he would be considered a "puff."

OSTC's production of *Billy Elliot* is at its best when contrasting the miner's life with Billy's efforts to learn how to dance. There are several numbers, highlighted by a very well done "Solidarity," where the violence of the strike is juxtaposed with the innocence of dance: strikers fight off police batons while girls in pink tutus chennai turn their way through the chaos.

Much of what propels the musical forward is mistrust and ignorance. When Billy's dance teacher Mrs. Wilkinson takes an interest in him, his first instinct is to think that she "fancies" him, a concern later echoed by his brother and father. When Billy's flamboyant friend Michael, who likes to cross-dress — "My dad does it all the time," he explains — learns of Billy's desire to dance, he warns, "People will think you're mental."

But it is during the extremely charming duet "Expressing Yourself," with Billy and Michael taking turns

trying on dresses, that Billy begins to see there is nothing wrong with him wanting to dance: "If you want to be a dancer, dance. If you want to be a miner, mine."

Returning to the dance studio and intent on learning how to dance, Billy joins Mrs. Wilkinson and dance class pianist Mr. Braithwaite in a wonderfully entertaining "Born to Boogie" culminating in Billy and Mr. Braithwaite (Greg LoBuono) doing the worm across the stage to thunderous applause.

But the highlight of the performance is clearly Dean. During the lengthy and curiously placed "Angry Dance" and "Electricity," he dances his way into the audience's heart displaying remarkable calm and control. His turns are crisp and his leaps are big; it is easy to forget that this kid is only 12! During a heart wrenching "The Letter," he also displays some pretty good pipes.

Shannon Lee Jones as the fiery dance teacher Mrs. Wilkinson proves a worthy adversary to Billy's headstrong father. Though her choreography comes off as a bit basic, she emerges as the evening's best singer, shining during "Shine" and "The Letter." But it is her fierce exchanges with Mr. Elliot and Billy's brother where she truly impresses.

Local favorite Christopher Swan (Mr. Elliot) also has many fine moments commanding the stage with a domineering performance while softening in a very believable and fatherly manner after seeing Billy dance. He too holds his own vocally with a very tender and emotional "Deep in the Ground."

Zaven Ovian (Tony, Billy's brother) nicely encapsulates much of the show's grit and anger, caught between his loyalty for his union brothers, his father and his brother. His struggle feels real and palpable.

Sarah Polen as the wacky and irreverent "Grandma" is great fun during "Grandma's Song," recounting her abusive and alcoholic husband while also describing his affinity for dancing, showing Billy that love of dance actually runs in the family.

OSTC's production of Billy Elliot: The Musical runs through October 23 at their Jefferson Boulevard theater. For tickets or more information visit: oceanstatetheatre.org.