

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT REVIEWS

■ Billy Elliot (Liam Mower, left) practices his pliés with pal Michael (Ryan Longbottom).



EDITOR'S PICK THEATER

Billy Elliot

■ Music by Elton John ■ Book and lyrics by Lee Hall ■ Directed by Stephen Daldry
■ London's Victoria Palace Theatre (open-ended run)

Among the recent flood of stage musicals squeezed out of popular movies, *Billy Elliot* is a natural. Stephen Daldry's 2000 movie debut—about a boy in a mining town who's drawn irresistibly to ballet—is filled with music and dance. Now in London's West End (and soon on Broadway), *Billy Elliot: The Musical* has much that is simply brilliant. It's a show that surpasses even the film.

Daldry and writer Hall have placed a stronger emphasis on the miners' strike, leading to the rousing opener, "The Stars Look Down," and the controversial "Merry Christmas, Maggie Thatcher" ("We celebrate today / 'Cause it's one day closer to your death"). And the choreography—at one point cops and strikers invade the studio where Billy and girls in tutus are rehearsing—captures how dance both provides Billy a refuge and lets him confront his world.

Oddly, the film's emotional peak—Billy's dad tries to become a scab to pay for his son's big audition—produces the show's weak point ("He Could Be a Star"). Every other element is good to remarkable, including the crumbling sets and the fact that nine young leads rotate in the three major roles for kids. I was delighted to catch the marvelous Liam Mower as Billy, though by all accounts the other two lads are subtly different and very good as well.

The happiest discovery of all? The gay subplot of the film is, if anything, even more prominent in the show. Billy's mate Michael has the Act 1 showstopper, "Expressing Yourself," a cheerful ode to cross-dressing. Billy dances a duet with his older self in Act 2 and acknowledges Michael with that friendly kiss right before the end. —Michael Giltz