

Q & A

# Where the Boys Are

**François Perron talks about getting boys into dance class and keeping them there.**

**A ballet teacher for the boys in *Billy Elliot: The Musical*, François Perron** is also managing artistic director of Manhattan Youth Ballet, a highly regarded ballet school in the heart of New York City. As a professional dancer, Perron performed with La Scala in Italy, Northern Ballet Theatre in England, The Joffrey Ballet, New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre. While his stylistic knowledge is eclectic, when he teaches, it is his Paris Opéra Ballet School training that shines through.—KL

## When do you recommend boys start training?

I started when I was 10. I don't think boys need to start earlier. Since ballet is mostly repetition, when they are too young, they can get bored. Also, you cannot push boys too early in jumps because they are still growing. You can go faster when they start a little later because they understand better what you are asking of them. I would start girls later, too, but in order to go on pointe at age 11, they must already have a good foundation of technique.

## When you teach 12-to 14-year-old boys do you usually have them in class with the girls or on their own?

That's the age where normally we separate them. Up to this point, the training for the boys and girls is the same, but when they get to this age, the boys begin working on male technique, like tour en l'air, and the girls begin pointe work.

## Do boys learn differently from girls?

Boys are usually slower. They're also more rowdy and want to play in class. Most of them know that there are not a lot of boys in ballet, so they test you. But what I like is that, in general, they're more fearless than the girls. Girls tend to be a little more cautious, especially when they start to do pointe work.

## Do you think that has to do with the actual steps they are learning?

No. You learn tour en l'air in quarters first, and once you come to one full tour, you just have to do it. No, I just think it's the boys. Also the competition among them is different from girls. It's more of a sports competition.



Perron helps Liam with his *développé à la seconde*.

Rachel Papo

## Do you recommend boys supplement their training with anything else?

Absolutely! When I was in the Paris Opéra Ballet School we did gymnastics with the coach from the national gymnastics team. We did the parallel bars and balance beam, and we learned some acrobatic moves. Later on, boys have to do conditioning for partnering. We have to lift, and ballet class is not enough when it comes to building that type of strength.

## The Billys are surrounded by a lot of men. How important is it for boys to have male role models?

Very. I know amazing female teachers for men and vice versa, but boys can relate more to men. It's good for them, especially in ballet. It's such a girls' world.

I have little boys in every level now at my school, but if I didn't and I had a little boy come to take class for the first time, I would try to put him in a level where there were other boys, even if he wasn't quite up to that level yet. OK, so maybe he'll spend two years in that level, but at least there are other boys and he can feel a little more reassured. ■