

Crib Sheet

Barre none

Eager to nurture the next generation of dancers, the city's leading ballet companies are pulling out all the stops to attract boys. By Gary Drevitch

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Here in our sophisticated city, no one thinks twice about girls playing hockey or taking karate classes. But enroll your boy in ballet class, and his peers (and maybe a few parents) are more likely than not to judge. To combat such rigid thinking, and moreover, to train future professionals, some of NYC's top ballet companies now hold classes exclusively for boys. And, in an effort to increase enrollment, they're offering those courses for free. (Not that they're desperate or anything.) The ballet institutions are also working to ensure that boys stop feeling embarrassed as they explore their inner Billy Elliot.

My six-year-old, Benjamin, takes a free class every Saturday morning at Ballet Hispanico on the Upper West Side, where 20 boys (no girls), ages six to eight, learn basic dance movements, albeit with instruction couched in sports lingo. Similar classes, also emphasizing athleticism, are offered to boys at the Ailey School, the Joffrey School and the School of American Ballet, which every year supplies the child performers for the New York City Ballet's *Nutcracker*. Following a renovation that provided SAB with two new studios, the school recently announced that starting this fall, it will offer, for the first time, free lessons to six- and seven-year-old boys. (In auditions this month, more than 200 boys are expected to compete for 60 spots in SAB's twice-weekly instruction.) Kay Mazzo, an SAB alumna who is cochair of the school's faculty, says that young hopefuls will be judged in two ways: First, the boys will stand at the barre as instructors examine their feet, toes, legs and hips to gauge flexibility. Then a pianist will play a theme and each child will make his way across the studio, any way he likes, as instructors assess how well he moves in step with the music.

So why keep the boys from the girls? Turns out there are practical reasons for schools to separate the sexes as kids approach their tween years: Boys begin working on ever-larger leaps, while girls go *en pointe*—but instructors and alumni are also convinced that single-sex classes provide boys with a sense of



On point Many of the kids trained at the School of American Ballet go on to become professional dancers.

comfort missing from coed groups, where boys often feel intimidated by their pink-tutued counterparts.

"They just become so much more self-conscious when there are girls involved," says Tracy Inman, codirector of the Ailey School's junior program. "There's a level of competition that's innate with boys: 'I can do it better. I can do it faster. Watch this.' That's one of the things that keep them here."

Cameron Dieck of Mount Kisco, New York, started at SAB when he was ten, after taking ballet in Westchester, where he often felt that the movements

he was taught were too feminine: "There was only one other guy in my class, and I would think, 'Why are there only two of us?'" he says. "It was refreshing to see so many other guys at SAB. Everybody here comes from a place where they were the only guy in the class."

Twelve-year-old Nicholas Smith of the Upper East Side has been at SAB since he was eight; he says that "about three quarters" of his seventh-grade classmates support his ballet commitment, and that thus far, he hasn't had to endure teasing—not that he cares about what other kids think, anyway.



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"I'm at home onstage," he says. "I really like the experience of a lot of people looking at me."

For many boys, though, relentless teasing can scare them away from dance. "I can't tell you how many very talented boys we've lost because they couldn't take the peer pressure," says Jo Matos, director of Ballet Hispanico.

SAB's Mazzo sent her own son to the school for three years, beginning at age eight. "He didn't tell his friends anything about being here," she says. Later, when he became a varsity lacrosse player, his coach asked her why he was so quick on his feet. "I said, 'It comes from his ballet class,' and that was the first any of his teammates heard that he had studied ballet. He told the guys, 'Hey, it's not easy. You try lifting a girl, and then jumping in the air and turning.' No one gave him a problem after that."

The School of American Ballet (sab.org) will hold auditions on May 7.