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wrote with Betsy Stahl) never offers viewers a clear sense of what Maya's plan is and what the ramifications are for either of the lead characters' actions. Ergo, while it unfolds artfully, it does so inside a vacuum, an interesting but nonetheless artificial movie world with a reason and logic separate from our own. Its soul is in the right place, but *Lost Souls* is a bit lost. (New Line, R, starts Friday, citywide)

Billy Elliot

reviewed by Laurel DiGangi

Billy Elliot is one of those charming British dramedies filled with those rough-and-tumble lower-class British archetypes that we Americans have adored from the time Dickens first

put pen to paper. Set in a northeastern mining town, we have a crusty old coal miner (Gary Lewis), his brutish older son (Jamie Draven), an eccentric, middle-aged spinster-type (Julie Walters — OK, she plays a married woman, but her husband does ignore her) and our pale, Dickensian young boy (Jamie Bell) who confronts them all in the quest of his ultimate dream: to dance ballet.

Unfortunately, *Billy Elliot* suffers from one ultimate problem that all the charm in the world cannot disguise. Billy's yearning to dance ballet is never made totally plausible by the filmmakers.

True, he's a total failure in the boxing ring, but why would that inspire him to join the cadre of ballerina wannabes rehearsing across the gym, especially when his initial attempts at pliés bring nothing but titters from little girls in tu-

tus? (My third-grade failure at dance did not send me running to the wrestling mat!)

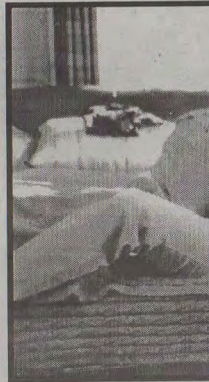
Especially when his father forbids it and his brother is ready to punch his lights out at the mere mention of "ballet" — (which everyone charmingly pronounces like that tropical island in the South Pacific and Dad uses as an expletive, as in "BA-lay! Fooking BA-lay!"). Especially when, frankly, Billy is no damn good at BA-lay until the film is half over and suddenly he goes into a tap-jazz-leaping frenzy, as if he's channeling Gene Kelly, Rudolph Nureyev and Bob Fosse all at once — which is really the only logical explanation for his obsession to begin with.

And let us make this perfectly clear — because the filmmakers do ad infinitum: Billy's quest has absolutely nothing to do with a gender-identity crisis or any of the so-called "poof" tendencies his father fears. Billy's all boy, turning down the advances of his more "sensitive" male friend (Stuart Wells) and even developing a mild love interest in his ballet teacher's daughter.

Billy Elliot is competently directed by first-time film director Stephen Daldry, a veteran of theatrical direction and production. His direction is not stage-bound

nor is he obsessed with proving his cinematic chops by continually moving the camera, as many first-timers do when making this transition. Bell himself is a superb dancer and, as a first-time actor, has a remarkable ability to elicit sympathy from the audience, which he does in this film, again and again.

Once you get past Billy's obsession with an art form that is not related to his cultural background, education, or life experience, the film does have its moments — especially after Dad caves in and accepts Billy's dancing (oh, you knew that was going to happen!). Unfortunately, charm turns to schmaltz in the final frames, when the now grown up Billy — with a Schwarzenegger build — leaps about onstage to *Swan Lake*, wearing nothing but feather pants and too much eye make-up, as his adoring Dad, brother and sensitive childhood friend look on in rapture. (Universal Focus, R, starts Friday, citywide)



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