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Here's to the Laddies Who Dance

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"There are many different, acceptable ways to be a man."

Musical theatre showed my son that it's okay he does ballet

My son is 12 years old. He is finishing up sixth grade. He loves math, science, and computer programming. And ballet. He's been taking dance classes since he was 8, and is currently in a 10½-hours-a-week pre-professional program in which he studies ballet, flamenco, and modern.

At first I didn't think there was anything unusual about his interests. But I was born in the former Soviet Union before immigrating to the United States with my parents. My father had been a background theatre dancer (which is why he can still sing you the entire score of *Carmen* or *Porgy and Bess* -- in Ukrainian). I remember how blown away he was the first time he watched *West Side Story*. He'd never seen that style of dancing before and couldn't stop raving about it, not to mention singing "(I Like to Be in) America" for obvious reasons. Meanwhile my brother was a national ice-dancing champion. Dancers -- male and female -- are venerated throughout Russia and much of Europe. They're superstars.

Not so much in the United States. To be fair, classical dance isn't a national obsession (though *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dancing with the Stars* are. Go figure). Prima ballerinas aren't household names. But when it comes to male dancers, it gets even more complicated. American boys, I gradually gathered, don't really do dance. There have been years when my son was the only boy in his class. The situation is apparently so dire, his dancing school has established a special forum for boys, during which male members of the main company speak to them about issues they may be facing, like bullying and accusations of not being "manly" enough. We parents are told to be vigilant.

Naturally, I decided to deal with the situation the best way I knew how: via musical theatre. I figured if society was going to batter my son with its version of what a male dancer was (or wasn't), I would present counterexamples.



Author's son at the Ballet Hispánico School of Dance. Photo by ©Christopher Duggan

So my dancing son and I went to see [Cagney](#). With the subtitle *The Musical About Hollywood's Tough Guy in Tap Shoes* and [a poster](#) featuring the title character kicking up his heels while brandishing a gun, I figured what could be better? We watched Cagney pick a fight when his pay envelope was lighter than promised, shoot a machine gun, shove a grapefruit in a woman's face, blow himself up to keep from being taken alive, and also dance. Gloriously. There's Cagney (Robert Creighton) -- dressed in women's clothing, no less -- clowning around during his first theatre job. There's Cagney as George M. Cohan, performing classic numbers from his Oscar-winning movie *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. There he is tapping for the troops during World War II. When we left the theater, my awe-struck son exclaimed, "No one can dance like that!" To which I replied, "Obviously, *he* can -- and did!"

Next, we saw [An American in Paris](#), which was directed and choreographed by British ballet great Christopher Wheeldon. While Cagney just entertained the troops, Jerry (Garen Scribner) is an actual American G.I. fresh off of liberating the City of Light. Everyone dances in this show: soldiers, sailors, shop clerks, bar patrons, even the spoiled rich boy (who was also in the Resistance) and his uptight, industrialist father. Although much of the time I watched what was happening onstage, I couldn't help glancing at my son to see his reactions. Often he was literally leaning forward in his seat, mesmerized, as if trying to get as close to the action as possible. During the "Fidgety Feet" number, he laughed out loud at the sight of Jerry, and then the entire ensemble, falling under the spell of the music, unable to keep from dancing in their chairs and, ultimately, all over the room. "That feels familiar!" he exclaimed.

He was equally amused by the ballet class in the first act, in which the strict, Russian teacher ignores the girl swearing it's not her fault that she's late. "You failed. Now get out of my sight." She tells another dancer, "You're too tall. Go be skyscraper somewhere else." My son giggled. It all felt so familiar.

We saw a few other musicals during our "dancing is manly" tour but, as unique as each one was, they all delivered the same message: Not only are there many different, acceptable ways to be a male dancer, there are many different, acceptable ways to be a man. I don't know how long my son's passion for dancing will continue. But I do hope he remembers that even after he hangs up his ballet slippers.

In addition to being an avid theatregoer, [Alina Adams](#) is a New York Times best-selling author of soap-opera tie-ins, romance novels, and figure-skating mysteries.

Top image: Cagney, photo by Carol Rosegg