

FILMS



Billy (Jamie Bell, left) shows his best friend, Michael (Stuart Wells), the ropes

Keep on moving

Dancing gets *Billy Elliot* and *Go* off on the right foot

BY JIM RADOSTA

BILLY ELLIOT

Regardless of sexual orientation, everyone has endured childhood traumas involving conformity, comfort and coercion. What gives *Billy Elliot* such universal appeal is how it rekindles these unpleasant memories while maintaining an uplifting tone.

First-time gay director Stephen Daldry has crafted what undoubtedly is the feel-good movie of the year. This normally would be a warning sign for most filmgoers to steer clear, but keep in mind there's a big difference between manipulative "inspirational" rubbish (*Pay It Forward*, *Remember the Titans*) and the real deal. *Billy Elliot* is the real deal.

It tells the story of an 11-year-old British boy who stumbles upon a ballet class after another frustrating boxing lesson. Despite the fact that no other guys would be caught dead dancing, Billy joins in and comes to learn he has a hidden talent.

Before he knows it, he's lying to his conservative family in order to conceal his secret shame. (Sound familiar?) Of course, he soon is caught, but he responds with defiant pride (ahem) that's nothing short of infectious. And his close-minded father eventually learns to accept him for who he is. (Do you detect a theme here?)

Jamie Bell gives an Oscar-worthy performance as a boy filled with energy for his new-found passion but also rage over his mother's early death. Julie Walters, an Academy Award nominee for *Educating Rita*, is his chain-smoking instructor whose frustration with her student's temper is matched only by her belief in his potential.

Daldry shows great promise in his ability to incorporate gritty realism—the movie is set during the heated 1984 coal miners strike, which is tearing Billy's family apart—with moments of sheer whimsical fantasy. He recently was named best director during the third annual British Independent Film Awards.

Although we never learn whether Billy grows up to be gay, he does have a best friend, Michael (Stuart Wells), who likes boys. When he receives an unwelcome kiss, he doesn't get upset but calmly responds, "Just because I like ballet doesn't mean I'm a poof."

This interaction is surprisingly brave for a film that could do for tutus what *The Full Monty* did for stripping and *Waking Ned Devine* did for the lottery. And given the presumptuous tenor of the Measure 9 debate, how refreshing to see a dignified representation of a preteen boy who already is in tune with his homosexuality.

GO

A dance movie for the nonfrilly set awaits renters on video and DVD. Whereas *Billy Elliot* depicts the refined grace of ballet, 1999's *Go* explores the pumping rhythms of raves.

Director Doug Liman, who brought audiences behind the scenes into the world of hipsters in *Swingers*, this time opts for a more challenging crowd: Generation Xers who just want to have some fun. He employs a nonlinear style that is reminiscent of both Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* and Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*.

Go—like the best films of another hot young auteur, Richard Linklater (*Dazed and Confused*)—focuses on one night in the lives of several people. Then, it rewinds and shows the evening all over again but from the perspective of a new character.

The story starts out from the perspective of a supermarket checkout girl who makes a failed attempt at drug dealing to avoid eviction. It then is seen through the eyes of a British sleazeball on a road trip to Las Vegas.

The final view is that of two gay soap opera stars turned police informants. Then, the story picks up where these three segments end, and Liman brings it all to a surprising yet hilarious conclusion.

Among the talented cast members are Tom Cruise look-alike Scott Wolf (*Party of Five*) and character actor Jay Mohr (*Jerry Maguire*) as the closeted celebrities. Timothy Olyphant, recently seen in *The Broken Hearts Club*, plays it straight here as a drug dealer.

Go—as its kinetic title suggests—maintains an energetic pace that never quits. These characters are living life on the edge, constantly pushing the limits of the law, of their relationships and of sanity.

Both *Swingers* and *Go* take some wicked jabs at both Los Angeles and Las Vegas and are packed with regional lingo. John August's script includes dialogue like "Don't go all 818 on me" (referring to the San Fernando Valley's area code) and nicknames such as "Orange County" (a yuppie).

One of the most impressive aspects of *Go* is its ability to explore racy issues without offending. Recent films seem to be reveling in their depravity, but Liman keeps the tone fresh and frivolous.

Although drug use is a major theme here, *Go* manages to strike the perfect balance: It neither glamorizes nor preaches about the subject. The ending simply speaks for itself. **JR**

After years of study, Copy Editor JIM RADOSTA has mastered "The Safety Dance." He can be reached at jim@justout.com.

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