

Soccer, Superheroes, and Dance: Boys-only Classes Offer Fun, Male Bonding, and Athleticism—and a Gateway to Formal Training

By: Brian McCormick

August 2016



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Boys-only classes offer fun, male bonding, and athleticism—and a gateway to formal training

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Attracting boys to dance has never been easy. It doesn't matter that football players like Hall of Famer Lynn Swann or the New York Jets' Steve McLendon took ballet and it improved their game, or that Lionel Messi looks like a ballet dancer when he shows how to control the soccer ball. With some exceptions—hip-hop is the most obvious—there are deep-

rooted obstacles to getting boys into the studio.

Some of it is the optics: little girls all in pink aren't a welcoming sight for little boys. It's not dance that's uninviting, say some, but an environment tailored for girls.

Plus, boys are simply different, and they require a different kind of attention and energy, especially when

they're young. Just as girls like being with other girls their age, boys want, like, and need to be with other boys.

But, as Nikolai Kabaniaev at City Ballet School in San Francisco notes, "It's not lucrative to have boys-only [classes] in this country." He's fortunate that his directors have made the commitment to "do whatever it takes."

OPPOSITE: Classes like Ailey Athletic Boys Dance for 7- to 10-year-olds at The Ailey School focus on locomotor skills and imagery involving engines and action heroes.

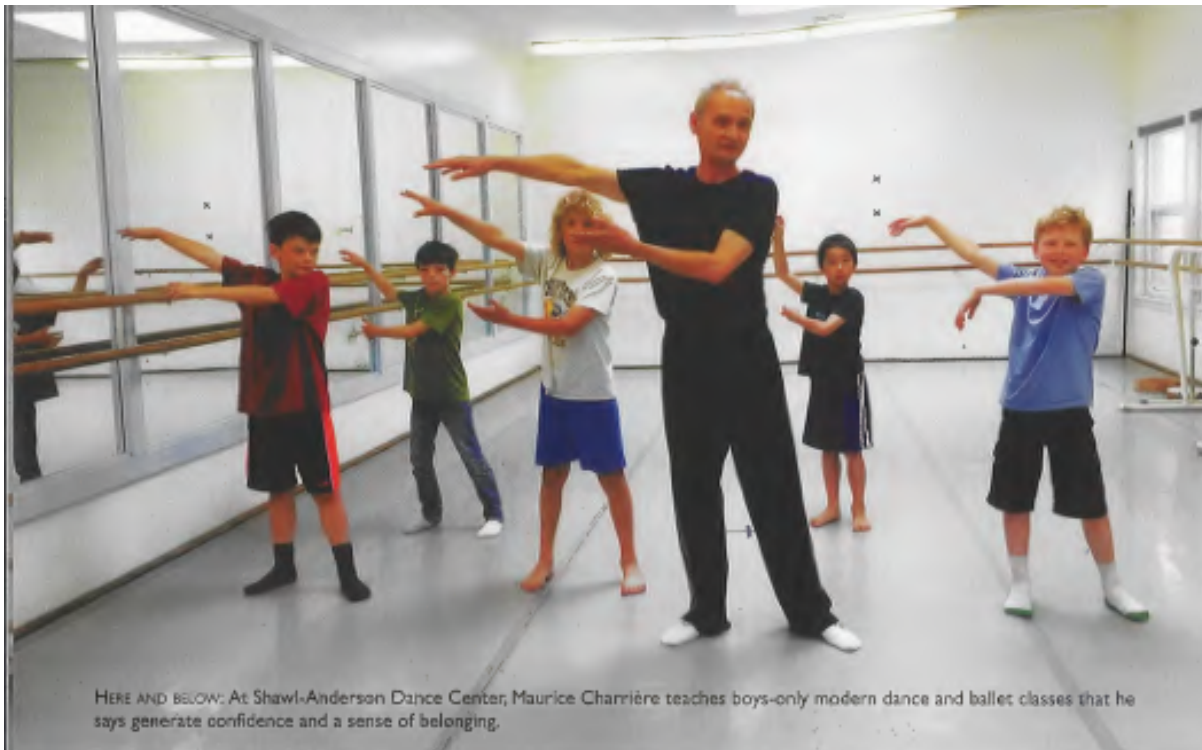
THIS PAGE, TOP AND BOTTOM: At The School at Steps, the For Boys Only class incorporates travel- and exploration-related imagery, sound effects, and adventure storylines.

Along with City Ballet's introductory dance classes for boys, there are other success stories that offer insight for studio owners who are trying, or hoping, to bring in the boys.

Having male teachers is essential to some. "They do dance with girls for performances," Kabanaiev says, "but I think it's very important that boys are taught by a man. We don't have another male teacher, and if I'm out of town, my older boys give the



Photo by Eduardo Patino, courtesy The School at Steps



HERE AND BELOW: At Shawl-Anderson Dance Center, Maurice Charrière teaches boys-only modern dance and ballet classes that he says generate confidence and a sense of belonging.

classes to the younger boys."

No matter what age group or skill level, whether the classes are designed for pre-professionals, cross-training, or to meet the needs of boys who have an interest in or would benefit from movement-based activities, all of the introductory boys' classes share one important element: the incorporation of big, bold imagery.

In the preschool age group, many classes geared toward attracting boys use superheroes as an entry point. Perhaps persuaded by the success of the Royal Academy of Dance in London in integrating video games and superheroes into its ballet training for boys—a 16 percent increase in boys taking ballet exams over the past two years—other schools have followed suit. For the most part, these programs are aimed at providing an opportunity for boys to dress up, have fun, and learn some of the building blocks of coordination.

Kate Thomas, director of The School at Steps in New York City, emphasizes how important it is for boys to develop physical awareness. "Two-



and 3-year-olds are just learning how their bodies work, how to do things like jumping from two feet to one foot," she says. "Girls get this in dance from an early age. Boys don't get it until they're into sports at 5 or 6."

At Steps, which began its 18-week, once-a-week boys-only class in January, they decided to "overhaul the whole appeal" of dance and "make it more relatable," Thomas says. "Fairy tales were out the win-

dow." Matt Williams, who teaches character skills in the pre-professional program and has a 4-year-old son, developed the class. "We pinpointed triggers that boys would turn away from," Thomas says. While the boys dress in appropriate dance attire, "it may not look like a dance class."

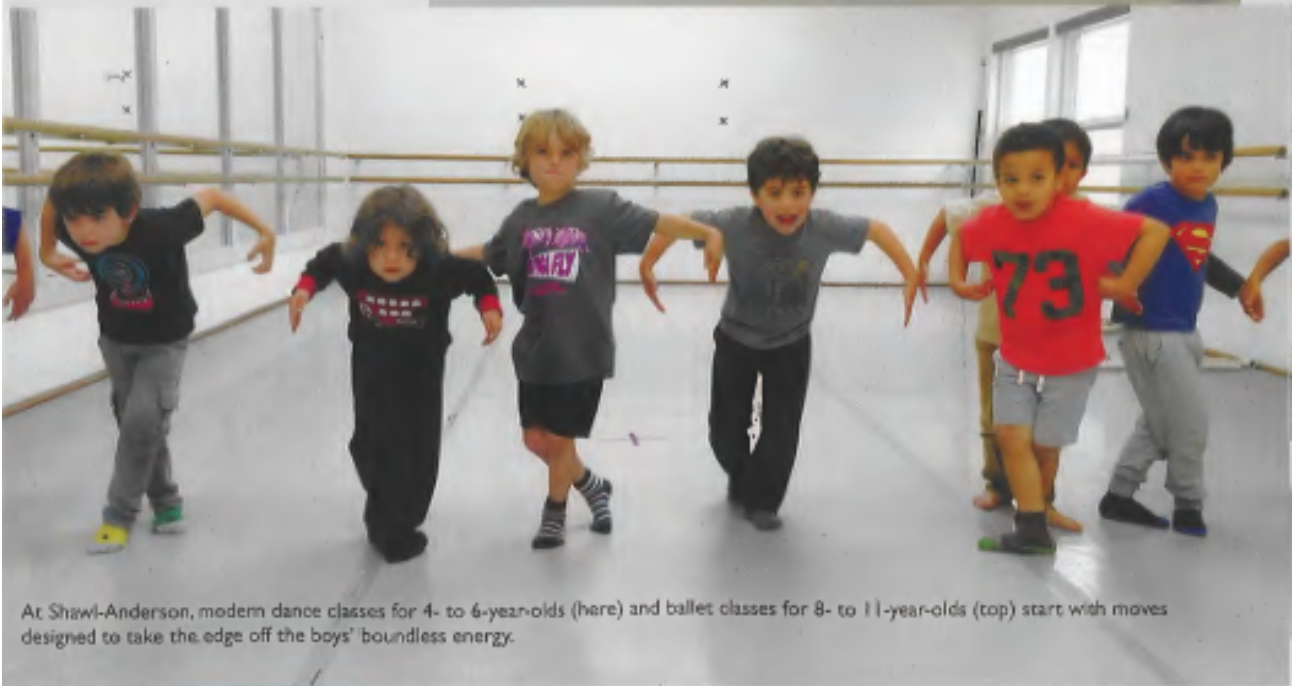
She describes each class as "like a little adventure: imagery of travel and exploration, sound effects, props, and storylines like landing on the moon turn the studio into a playground, with obstacles to jump over and crawl through." Luke Muscat co-teaches the class, bringing his ballet background into the mix. Having a percussionist who is male reinforces the masculinity in the space.

In Denver, Colorado, Leap Dance Studio founder Elizabeth Ellis brainstormed ideas with her teachers for the 3- to 5-year-old age group before introducing Boys Creative Movement class, a weekly 45-minute ballet class that she taught for six years. The class introduces beginning ballet and French terminology, focusing on rhythm, coordination, and creative ideas. "We definitely wanted less

walking on demi-pointe and more descriptive imagery, like big robots, or rockets shooting," she says. "And of course the class has lots of jumps and leaps."

At City Ballet, where classes are split between two age groups, the six-day-a-week, two-hour class is disciplined, but there is plenty of time for stretching and jumping. Kabaniaev spends 45 minutes on jumps and 20 minutes on stretches in every class. This kind of intensity is not available to boys in mixed classes, he says. "They want to play games like soccer and hockey, as a group. I have to lure them into working hard and understanding all the little things, but first I need to give them interest to come every day." He does this through "an intensity of training with a focus on strength and athleticism, and also not boring them with the fine points." Little by little, he adds in the discipline and details.

At The Alley School, in New York City, there are two programs—Bounding Boys for 4- to 6-year-olds, a



At Shawl-Anderson, modern dance classes for 4- to 6-year-olds (here) and ballet classes for 8- to 11-year-olds (top) start with moves designed to take the edge off the boys' boundless energy.

Photos by Maurice Cherriere

one-hour, once-weekly class that has run for 20 years, and Ailey Athletic Boys Dance, a scholarship program for 7- to 10-year-olds. Tiffany Barnes, director of the Junior Division, says that the school initially tried tumbling as a means to bring in boys. They brought in Big Apple Circus and focused on skills like movement, facial

expressions, and clown training. But they recognized that boys needed to develop locomotor skills. The classes are structured, but faster paced and livelier than those for girls.

"We use imagery that [the boys] relate to," Barnes says, like engines, athletes, and action heroes. "We get them to use their imaginations



and then attach that to the technical aspects, such as proper alignment. We have a warm-up, structured practice, across the floor, and always time for free dance. We use the same imagery from class to build a story, and we always have live music accompaniment."

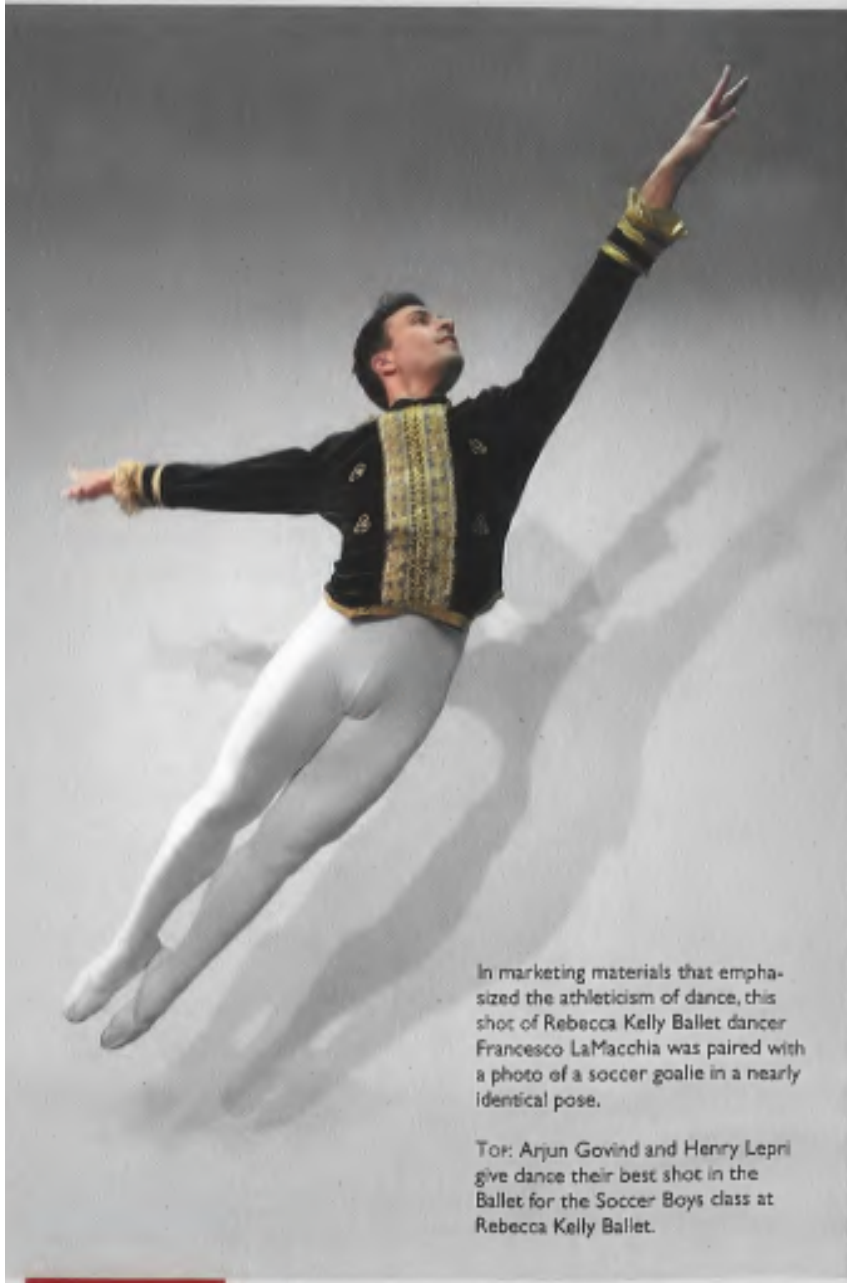
Tracy Inman, co-director of The Ailey School, started the Athletic Boys program specifically for talented dancers coming out of Bounding Boys who are "still not quite ready to be in [classes] with girls," Barnes says. "The curriculum highlights that it's cool to dance, as well as social. At the same time the boys are getting involved in sports, they're learning that dance is like a team sport."

Athletic Boys take three classes one day a week, including ballet, tap, and West African, with a change-up in technique every six to eight weeks.

"In terms of dynamics, boys are rowdier in class than girls, generally speaking," says Maurice Charnière of Shawl-Anderson Dance Center in Berkeley, California. Since 2011, he's been teaching modern dance classes for boys in two age groups: 4 to 6 and 7 to 10. Last summer he started teaching ballet to boys ages 8 to 11.

"I often start class with more energetic moves rather than the typical stretches, to tire them out a little," he says.

Rebecca Kelly teaches a Ballet for the Soccer Boys class for 9- to 13-year-olds at Rebecca Kelly Ballet in New York City. The once-a-week class, which runs in two eight-week sessions from January through mid-May, is focused on cross-training, taking advantage of off-season time,



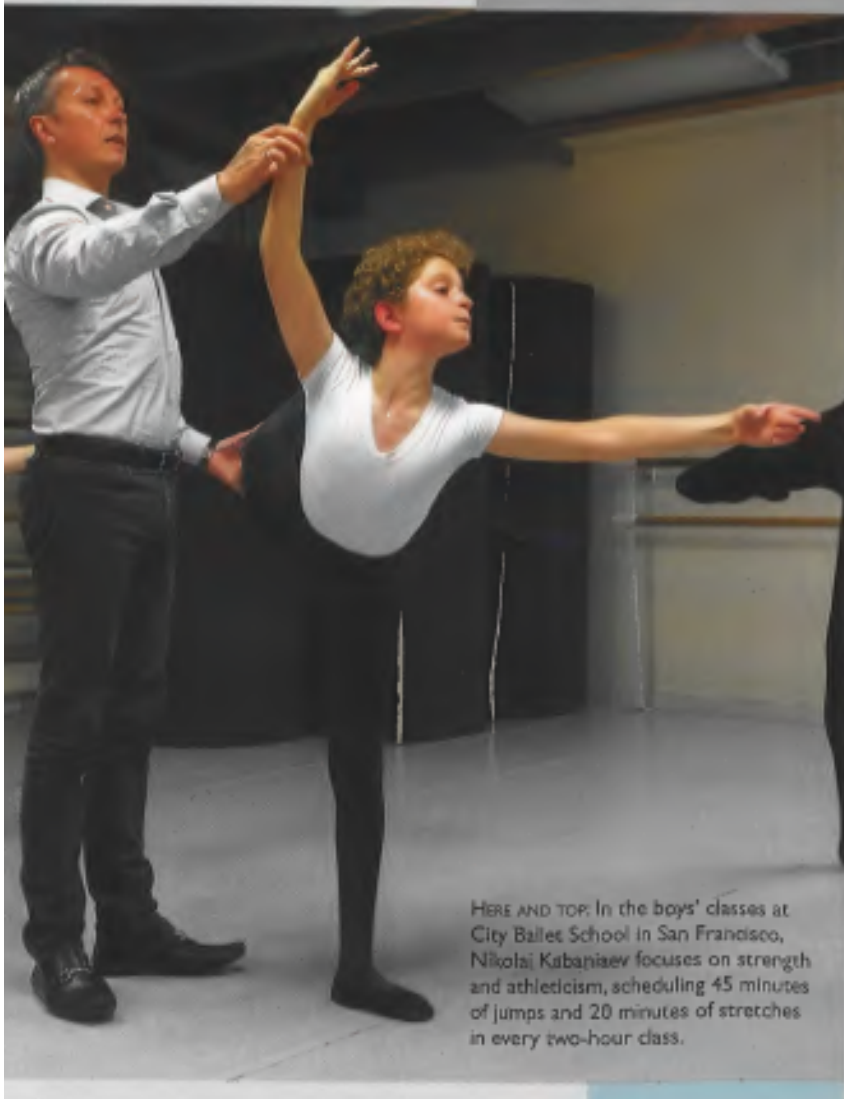
In marketing materials that emphasized the athleticism of dance, this shot of Rebecca Kelly Ballet dancer Francesco LaMacchia was paired with a photo of a soccer goalie in a nearly identical pose.

Top: Anjun Govind and Henry Lepri give dance their best shot in the Ballet for the Soccer Boys class at Rebecca Kelly Ballet.

Top Photo by Appleby: Bottom Photo by Rebecca Kelly

and looking at ballet through a sports lens: speed, balance, coordination, core strength, jumps, kicks, and dodges. The class ad, in fact, features a photo of the Cavalier from *The Nutcracker* side by side with a soccer goalkeeper deflecting a shot—practically a mirror image. Kelly researched some of soccer's technical moves and adapted ballet exercises to them.

She also talked with a soccer dad/coach, who said that many families understand that cross-training and between-season training is key to developing new skills, utilizing knowledge, preventing injuries, and obtaining an "edge." "They can test



HERE AND TOP: In the boys' classes at City Ballet School in San Francisco, Nikolai Kabaniaev focuses on strength and athleticism, scheduling 45 minutes of jumps and 20 minutes of stretches in every two-hour class.

out our dance methods for pushing off the ground through the foot in a particular sequence, how the timing of an arm movement earns them extra height in a jump, how core strength speeds them in a turn, how the inner thigh muscles add dexterity and coordination," Kelly explains. "We talk about the speed of the hunting animal in chase, the grace of a leaping gazelle, the effortless landing of a cat." She also literally lowers the bar(re) to make it easier for the boys to get their legs up: "They need to be able to see immediate results."

Attracting and recruiting boys usually requires some help from the parents. "They are all looking for different things," Barnes says.

"We are educating [the parents] as well," Kabaniaev says. "There is no textbook for parents—what training the boys need, where, and how to get it."

At Leap, originally only one boy was enrolled, and it was his mom who rallied other parents to get enough boys interested to run a separate class: the school's minimum class size is five students.

Likewise, Kelly's class was initiated by the persistent families of two boys, each with an older sister who danced. "I didn't want to teach a private class or semi-private class," Kelly says, "so I told one dance mom,

'Find me more than two and I'll think about it.' "

Keeping boys in dance is a different challenge. Barnes says that demand for 4-year-olds fluctuates, but it's consistent for 5- and 6-year-olds. She refers to the bridge year between ages 6 and 7 as a time when boys begin to change their focus and need to know there's going to be some action.

hiatus.

Among these school owners and teachers there is widespread agreement that the main way to market dance to boys is to offer a boys-only class. Community associations, flyers, and ads in parenting magazines help get the word out, but, mostly, boys need to see their peers doing it.

"The greatest lure is of course the



Ailey Athletic Boys Dance classes at The Ailey School, while structured, are faster paced than classes for girls and include time for free dance.

Rotating the techniques taught helps to keep the boys engaged, akin to the way athletes and weight trainers use muscle confusion to keep themselves interested and physically tested. (By changing workouts you "confuse" your muscles and increase stimulation and adaptation.)

Sometimes there aren't enough boys, and sometimes they don't make it into the pre-professional ranks. The good news, at least at two of the schools, is that integrating boys from a boys-only program into classes with girls hasn't resulted in any dropouts. They've done it at Ailey, and they had to do it at Leap, where they hope to offer the class again after a recent

presence of other boys in the class," Charrière says, "and no matter how much we strive for gender equality in our perception, relations, and educational systems, we can't deny the fact that at a young age gender [identification] is a rallying point that reinforces self-confidence and a sense of belonging."

"Nobody becomes a dancer in two or three eight-week sessions; we have no illusions about that," Kelly says. "But these boys are developing a huge respect and enthusiasm for what can be achieved through the discipline of ballet, and they experience joy in my class. If that is considered a success, we'll start with that." ■