

Dance fever: Oklahoma City University student fondly recalls days starring in 'Billy Elliot' in London, New York

BY RICK ROGERS For The Oklahoman Published: May 29, 2016



Tanner Pflueger [Photo provided]

Nine years ago at a ballet competition in Chicago, Tanner Pflueger was invited to audition at an open call for Elton John's musical "Billy Elliot." Being chosen would be a long shot for the talented young dancer, one of 150 boys competing.

In the end, Pflueger and one other boy from the Midwest were selected to attend a two-week intensive workshop in New York. There, he joined a dozen other young dancers who were taught the title character's enormously challenging choreography.

"I was 12 at the time and didn't think anything would come of it," said Pflueger, now 21 and a student at Oklahoma City University. "I thought I might be too old or my voice might break. But I got two more callbacks and eventually was put into the London production."

Pflueger joined the cast of "Billy Elliot" in September 2008. Seven months later, the young dancer had another unexpected opportunity come his way. One of the actors playing Billy in the New York production had to take a leave of absence, and Pflueger was asked to replace him. He spent a month in New York and then returned to London for the remaining five months of his contract there.



“Being so young, you're full of energy and you just go for it,” Pflueger said of his experience with the musical that won Olivier and Tony awards. “It was crazy and wonderful at the same time to think that I was actually a part of that.”

Based on the 2000 film of the same name, “Billy Elliot” follows the story of a young boy who trades his boxing gloves for ballet shoes. Living with his father, brother and grandmother in County Durham, England, Billy auditions for and is accepted into London's prestigious Royal Ballet School.

The role of Billy puts the actor playing the part through some of the musical theater's most demanding choreography. The first act finale ends with “Angry Dance,” Billy's volatile response after his father forbids him to dance.

The show's emotional highlight is “Electricity,” a second act number in which Billy attempts to articulate what goes through his mind when he dances. What follows is an extensive solo for the performer, an exhaustive but visually stunning showstopper.

“That was such a fun and rewarding number to perform,” Pflueger said of “Electricity.” “This dance is the culmination of all the feelings he has inside. I would always feel so proud of myself at the end of it. Hitting that pose and knowing that I had given it my all was all I could do. The rest was up to the audience.”

Growing experiences

Much like the many young actors who have appeared in long-running productions of “Peter Pan,” “The Sound of Music,” “Oliver” and “Annie,” age and maturity become factors that limit a performer's run in a show.

“Around June or July of 2009, my voice was starting to break, and singing was getting a little difficult for me,” Pflueger recalled. “Toward the end of my run, they had to lower a couple of my songs a half step so I could comfortably hit the high notes.

“All of the Billys also had to be about the same height. By the end, I had become the tallest Billy. I remember the day when the resident director had to come tell me that I was near the end of my run. I did shed a tear, but I understood at the same time that that day was bound to come.”

Following his stint as the title character in two highly publicized productions of the musical, Pflueger resumed his studies in his home state of Nebraska. A few years later, he began looking into collegiate programs noted for their dance programs.

“A couple of girls who had gone to my studio in Omaha had raved about OCU, so I decided to check it out after my junior year in high school,” Pflueger. “I auditioned, got in and fell in love with it. I'll be a senior this fall.”

Pflueger has spent the past two summers pursuing his dream of becoming a musical theater performer. He's been cast in numerous productions at both Music Theatre Wichita and the Muny in St. Louis. He'll return to Wichita this summer to appear in productions of “Nice Work If You Can Get It,” “Beauty and the Beast” and “Oklahoma!”

Celebrating a legacy

Pflueger says that while he cherished his experiences playing the title character in “Billy Elliot,” he assumed that was a closed chapter in his young life. But then another unexpected opportunity came his way.

After 4,600 performances in London's West End, it was announced that “Billy Elliot” would end its 11-year run on April 9. Rather than conclude with a few fond farewells from the Victoria Palace stage, it was decided that the final performance would become a gala affair.

Producers decided to invite all of the performers who had played Billy over the years in London to attend the final performance. Of the 42 actors who had been cast in the title role, three dozen, including Pflueger, were able to participate.

“They wanted to give all four of the current Billys a chance to appear, so they took a tag team approach and let each of them appear in a few scenes,” Pflueger said. “They did a similar thing with (the actors playing) Michael and Debbie.

“Everybody was so excited to be there, because it was the last night. We had only been told that we were going to watch the final performance and then they would call all the former Billys on stage.

“Elton John gave a speech, and then all of the Billys came on stage for a final bow, finale kind of thing. It was incredible to be there with everyone who had taken some part in this amazing production.

“When the curtain finally came down, it was the end of what had become a legacy. It was cool to see that chapter of my life finally come to a close. It's something I will remember for the rest of my life.”