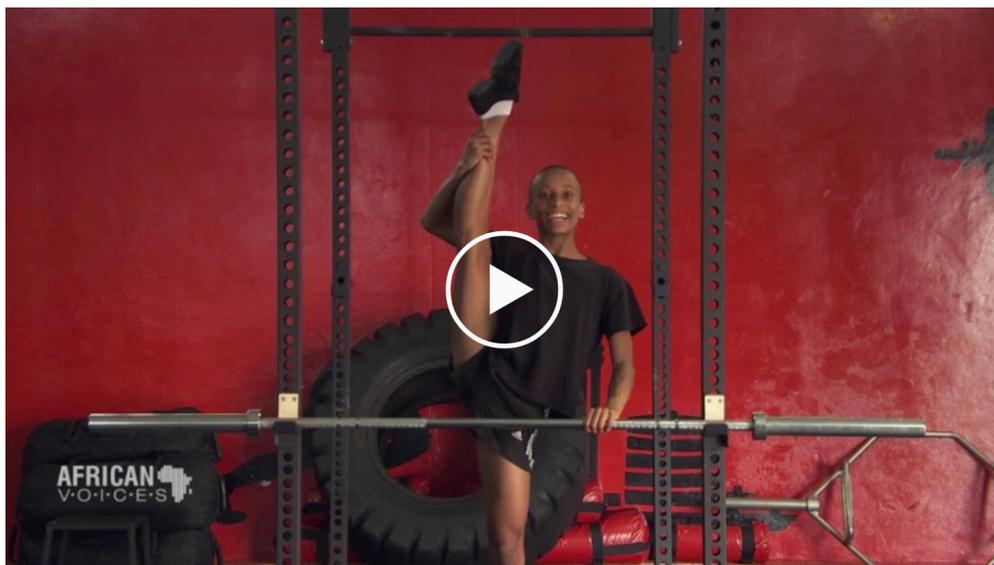




# Meet South Africa's Billy Elliot

By Michelle Cohan and Nosmot Gbadamosi, for CNN

Updated 8:38 AM ET, Wed July 13, 2016



South Africa's star ballet boy 07:35

**(CNN)** A 16-year-old male dancer is determined to prove that South Africa can produce global ballet stars. Leroy Mokgatle is breaking stereotypes of what a ballet star is supposed to look like. The non-muscular, slight-framed South African was told he was "too short" to be a male principal dancer.

But this year, he won the audience choice award in the prestigious 'Prix De Lausanne' dance competition. The second time ever a South African has won the award (the first was in 1988). He's also the first ever male South African dancer to win a classical medal through the 2014 Youth American Grand Prix award.

"I don't want South Africa to be seen as a country that can't produce anything," he says. "I want to change how the world sees us."

"We have incredible talent in South Africa" says Mokgatle, "it's not been shown enough to the world so no one knows that there is actually a ballet company in South Africa."

A male ballet dancer is a rare occurrence globally and even more uncommon in South Africa. Ballet is seen as something girls do, Mokgatle explains.

"Dance is not really supported in this country," he says, "as a boy at a young age you have to play soccer, you have to play cricket."

Mokgatle, who never knew his father, was raised by his grandparents and extended family following the death of his mother in 2007. Ballet, he admits, entered his life accidentally. When he signed up for it as an extracurricular class, he didn't realize what it was. As a result he was the only eight-year-old boy pirouetting in the class, but he carried on regardless.

Mokgatle's day starts early and ends late. At 6am, he starts the day with body conditioning and fitness classes which last until 6.30pm -- all in pursuit of the perfect grand plie.

Discouragement has been something he has had to live with, but this only serves to motivate him.

"I'm not afraid of failure at all," beams Mokgatle, "that's dancing. You have to take risks."

"South Africa may not have the perfect Russian body type, we might not have the correct feet or the correct hair or whatever they require in overseas companies," says Mokgatle, "but I can tell you right now we dance from the heart."