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Boy, can he dance

Primary 6 pupil Kenzo Seah stumbled upon ballet when he was eight years old and has since won several awards at international competitions

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Meet Singapore's aspiring Billy Elliot.

Eleven-year-old Kenzo Seah won an award in the finals of the Youth America Grand Prix, a prestigious student ballet scholarship competition billed as the world's largest.

In the finals in New York two months ago, the Singaporean clinched the second prize in the pre-competitive category for boys aged nine to 11. He performed a 76-second variation from the ballet *La Fille Mal Gardée*.

As part of his prize, he was offered a scholarship to attend a two-month dance programme at the Berlin State Ballet School in Germany. More than 5,000 hopefuls reportedly vie for scholarships in the competition every year.



Kenzo, whose enthusiasm for ballet recalls the Billy Elliot character in the famed movie and stage musical, recalls that about 40 boys - from countries such as Italy, Brazil and the United States - competed in his category during the finals. At press time, the organisers did not respond to queries for details of the contest.

In addition to pursuing ballet, Kenzo Seah is also on the school's table tennis team. ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM

"Backstage, I was nervous," says the Primary 6 pupil from Montfort Junior School. "The other finalists were brilliant. I was happy to be in the finals. I certainly did not expect to win anything."

However, Kenzo will not be attending the programme in

Germany as he needs to attend school in Singapore.

This is not the first international ballet competition that Kenzo has done well in. Among his achievements is a silver in the children's division in the Asian Grand Prix competition in Hong Kong in 2013. A year later, he won first prize in the classical solo ballet category (primary school division) in the Nihon Ballet Academy Junior Ballet Competition in Fukuoka, Japan.

These are unexpected accomplishments for a boy who stumbled upon ballet and whose parents were initially sceptical about his interest in dancing. His father is a director in a construction company and his mother, a housewife.

When he was eight, his mother took him to fetch his younger sister from ballet class. Outside the studio, he watched the energetic movements and graceful poses of the dancers and was intrigued.

"It looked cool and I found videos online of boys doing ballet too, so I wanted to try." He asked to attend a trial class. His mother, Mrs June Seah, 39, was hesitant. "I didn't know any boys who did ballet," she says.

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KENZO SEAH, 11

Two months later, she relented. She had checked Kenzo's Web browser history and found that he had watched videos of ballet performances on YouTube.

For the past four years, he has been attending ballet classes at least four times a week at Cheng Ballet Academy in Bukit Timah Road. Says its artistic director and co-founder, Mr Cheng Hsienfa, 50: "It's rare to find someone like Kenzo. He is so expressive, sensitive and can handle difficult moves despite his age. I believe he has a gift and, with proper training, can go far."

Apart from ballet, Kenzo also has a keen interest in sports and is on his school's table tennis team.

He says: "To me, ballet and sports have the same outcome - both help me become stronger and fitter."

Although Kenzo is scaling back on his ballet practice to prepare for the PSLE this year, he is keen to continue pursuing ballet, possibly even professionally.

"It is too early for him to decide," says Mrs Seah. "But if he wants to do it, I will support him."

Adds Kenzo: "It's hard to describe, but I feel free when I'm dancing. I feel like myself. I'm just a normal boy who dances."

Who says ballet is for only girls?



Wee Ch-yen from Crestar School of Dance, with his teacher, Ms Hui Ji. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

On dance shows such as *Dancing With The Stars* and *So You Think You Can Dance*, it is not uncommon to see men perform ballet moves - spectacular turns and awe-inspiring jumps - to thunderous applause.

Some ballerinos have emerged as social media stars. On Instagram, Russia-born dancer Daniil Simkin has more than 72,000 followers, while French dancer Benjamin Millepied has more than 75,000.

Despite this, there are still only a few boys in Singapore doing ballet.

A check with 10 dance schools and institutions with dance programmes shows only a handful of boys donning tights and doing splits.

The Singapore Ballet Academy has five boys. The School of Dance - which has one studio in Mountbatten and another in Yishun - has none.

Kavanagh Dance in Thomson Road has one boy among its approximately 300 ballet students. Its founder and artistic director Ruby Kavanagh, 56, says some people still believe boys who do ballet are effeminate. "This perception is wrong," she clarifies. "Boys in ballet are taught to move differently from girls. The boys' training emphasises strength and endurance, which are masculine traits."

One observation of the dance schools is that some boys tend to be interested in ballet only when they are very young.



Of the about 300 ballet students at Kavanagh Dance, Justin Wong is the only boy. ST PHOTO: SEAH KWANG PENG

For example, in Stepping Out Studios at City Square Mall, all the boys in its ballet classes are two to five years old. Says Ms Chelsea Coleborne, a senior dance teacher at the studio: "Most boys who continue dancing after that age choose to broaden their dance style development to include tap, jazz or hip-hop. Few choose to focus on just ballet."

Adds Mrs Kavanagh: "From about the age of five, the boy realises he is the only one in the class. His friends might also tease or laugh at him and this can be discouraging."

Justin Wong, 13, the only male ballet student at Kavanagh Dance, recalls: "When I started dancing at five, some girls in

my dance class giggled whenever I performed my moves. I felt self-conscious at first, but got used to it."

Kenzo Seah, 11, who has won awards at ballet competitions and attends Montfort Junior School, says schoolmates who hear about his achievements sometimes ask him to perform splits for them.

His response? A smile and a short "next time". If they tease him, he ignores them.

"I'm not affected by what others say. I just know that I like dancing and want to continue doing it."

Six-year-old Wee Ch-yen goes to the Crestar School of Dance at Woodlands Civic Centre. In his class of 11 students, he is the only boy. This, to him, is a good thing.

He says excitedly: "Do you know, during the performance, I am always the prince? It is fun."

Says his mother, Mrs Wee Young Hui, 44, an educational officer: "For now, he is just happy to be the centre of attention."

Should he get teased because of ballet, he will have to learn to deal with it, she adds. "This is part of growing up. I will encourage him to do anything that makes him happy."

Indeed, it was Mrs Wee's idea to sign Ch-yen up for ballet lessons when he was three years old.

"I saw he was interested and I don't think ballet is just for girls. Boys can learn many things such as better posture and self-discipline."

Dance veterans say although societal views of male ballet dancers have changed slightly, there is still some way to go.

Dr Caren Carino, vice-dean and principal lecturer of dance programmes at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, says: "Parents today are more enlightened. They are more exposed to ballet and ballet performances."

Ms Cheah Mei Sing, dance faculty head at the School of the Arts, sees a consistent though small male representation at ballet concerts by home-grown dance schools. She says: "There is a small but growing shift in mindset."

Benson Ang

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