

## Teachers – Writers – Poets

### Billy Elliott – The Other Side of the Coin

by Sam Down (Finland)

How did it come to this? thought Billy, as he gnawed distractedly at what was left of the nail on the middle finger of his left hand. It would be incorrect to say, he ruminated, that this was the only nail he had left to chew, because there wasn't really anything left to chew – but it was the only finger that had anything his teeth could grip onto besides flesh. Of course, he could have stopped nibbling his nail – in fact, that was without any doubt the most sensible thing to do. This was going to hurt in the morning, once the dull sedation of the now mandatory post-performance alcohol and cocaine had worn off. But then, didn't he deserve a bit of pain?

Billy had seen his father and Tony, his brother, in the audience – caught a glimpse of them in the front row – rapturous, along with the rest of the crowd that had assembled at the Royal Opera House for the opening night. Rapturous, oblivious, teary-eyed, proud. So proud. After all the difficulties, all the fights, arguments, all the hardship, they were so proud of little Billy, who, not so little any more, had risen up and, in their eyes, surpassed them in every way, become a beacon for the family, a bright light saying “Here we are: The Elliotts. We exist. We'll have a place in history, thank you very much”. If only they knew the truth. The bitter, agonising truth. He looked over at Janie, his co-star and sometime lover, semi-naked, bedraggled in the remnants of her performance gear, love-stained, floating in a narcotic haze, barely aware of her surroundings, and he felt genuine disgust. Not for her – she retained a certain sweet innocence, despite all her indulgences and her insatiable sexual appetite (rumour had it that for new male members of the troupe it was practically part of the initiation ritual to take a piece of her dignity, although when Billy had jealously tried to ascertain the truth of this gossip, astonishingly his inquisitions had met almost exclusively with

coyness from the usually brash young bucks). Sweet, innocent Janie, nineteen years old, still with a hope in life. For all her misdeeds, a grain of purity ran through her very being. Billy couldn't find anything but tenderness in his heart for her. He felt a deep, gut-wrenching disgust for himself though, and moreover for what he'd done to Janie. He didn't deserve her affection. He was worthless. Pitiful. He screwed his mouth up as he spat the word out several times, enunciating the first syllable, becoming increasingly vehement each time, ending with a shout so forceful that it caused Janie to stir, although not to wake: "Pitiful, pitiful, pitiful, pitiful, pitiful...PITIFUL!" But don't pity me, thought Billy, just in case there was a god listening at the time. I don't warrant your pity.

He let his mind wander, started to wonder if things would have been different had he followed in the footsteps of his father and brother, rather than going into this line of work – if that's what you can call it. Constant parties and revelry, debauched behaviour was rife amongst the dancing community, and it was a well-known fact. And he, now a veteran, practically the Grandfather of his troupe, nay, the Godfather, the leader of the pack, revered, respected, for what? Being better at it than them? Having more experience of this kind of depravity than any of the youngsters in his charge combined? He should be teaching them how to live properly, to learn from his mistakes, not nurturing their youthful, inquisitive, hormonal fervour. Pitiful, pathetic. The words whirled around his vacant, alcohol-numbed mind. People around him had told him not to worry. That's just the way things are, the lie of the land – you can't alter it, they'd said. Well, today things were going to change. Maybe not for the whole world, but at least for Billy. He was going to become the Billy Elliott that his friends and family thought they knew and loved. The Billy Elliott he should have been. He was going to go straight to rehab on Monday. No, today. After just one more line, to make it easier to approach, to admit out loud that he had a problem. No, now. Now! It was now or never, and for the first time in his life, Billy really knew the meaning of the word "challenge".