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## How secret ballet lessons made Billy the kid a star

Clare Morgan Arts editor  
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It was a case of art imitating life for Dayton Tavares, a schoolboy about to take a star role in *Billy Elliot the Musical* on Broadway.

Dayton, 13, of Penrith, left for New York last week with his mother Sharon to begin rehearsals before his debut next month.

But in an echo of the musical - in which Billy takes ballet classes instead of the boxing lessons demanded by his coal miner father - Dayton spent six months learning ballet before spilling the beans to his father, Elvis. Kylie Vassallo, Dayton's dance teacher at Studio 11, Penrith, said he came to a hip-hop class when he was nine after being persuaded by his sisters, Aeysha and Tenille.

Straight away, Ms Vassallo saw her new student had talent and suggested he take up dance.

"He had so much ability, which was obvious right away. He was doing soccer at the time but he fell in love with dance.

I suggested he take up jazz and tap, but his father didn't want him to do ballet.

"We snuck him into ballet class behind his father's back and he did it for six months before his dad found out.

"Dayton was winning competitions after only six months, so his father could see there was something there," Ms Vassallo said.

Dayton joined the Sydney production of *Billy Elliot* halfway through its run and starred on the opening night in Melbourne earlier this year.

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His proud father spent much of that performance in tears.

The youngster could not believe he had scored a role in the Broadway production, which won 10 Tony Awards this year.

"I had my last show in Melbourne and I thought that was it for *Billy* and then all of a sudden we got this big call saying, 'We want you to go to New York,' and it all just went from there," he said.

He was "a bit nervous" but was sure he would be fine for the demanding role.

Dayton is one of two new faces for the part, a 14-year-old from Canada also getting the call.

Because of the role's physical demands, with Billy on stage for most of the performance, four boys play him during a season.

Ms Vassallo said she had a very close relationship with Dayton - another echo of the Billy Elliot story, in which Billy forms a bond with his teacher.

"Dayton and I have a rare bond. I have closeness with all my students but with him, I don't know - it's just a respect that goes both ways."

So much so that she has booked her flight to see him perform in January. "I'm so excited. I really can't believe it."

**with AAP**

*This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2009/11/08/1257614959548.html>*